

Halo: 5

by Last Ride Of The Valkyries

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Summary: When the Infinity left for Requiem a second time, John-117 didn't go with. He was on a planet of sand, a journey of self. Based on the Halo 5 trailer, this is pure speculation. Rated T because I assume you've already played the incredibly violent games.

## 1. Phoenix Soul

**\*\*A/N:** As I said at the end of Drifting By and By, I was out of ideas. I might do something about Sif a little later, but until recently, I was uninspired. The xBox 1 looks kind of stupid, but that Halo 5 trailer did look really neat. Rather sad.\*\*

**\*\*** So I'm going to try and explain the Halo 5 story. I might be including bits of Blue Team and the Arbiter as well, but their stories might not tie into John's wanderings much. Be warned-I will be showing this in a video game format some of the time, so you can expect quite a bit of gunplay.\*\*

**\*\*If** you haven't seen the Halo 5 trailer or finished Halo 4 (Spartan Ops not required), spoilers may appear. Other than that, enjoy.\*\*

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><p>Phoenix Soul<p>

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><p>Day Three of Required Civilian Reintegration<p>

John sat on the modified bed, head in his hands. He wasn't a Master

Chief Petty Officer of the Navy anymore. Although the new Admiral Osman had given him an honourable discharge, told him that with the new SPARTAN-IVs, he could try his hand at civilian life, John knew that the discharge was really because of Cortana. He knew that Del Rio's after action report, and probably the reports of several others, would have damned him, considering that he went AWOL for a rampant A.I.

Now that she was dead, he would certainly be marked unstable and unfit for action. So he had been forced into civilian reintegration. Maybe, if John had her, he would be okay. But she had asked which of them was the machine, and he was still mulling over it.

Besides, he had made a promise. John groaned as he stood up. Chronologically, he was in his forties. Because of cryo, his body was in its thirties. Because of the war, his psyche was in its sixties. That was the part that groaned.

John hung his head as he stared the daily routine. Brush, wash, shave. He didn't even eat. He wasn't hungry. John hadn't been hungry for three days now. He wasn't exactly tired, either. John was just empty.

John didn't have his armour. As military hardware, it had been confiscated. So had almost all of his possessions. He hadn't owned anything since he was six. In fact, all he had was Cortana's empty matrix, but that was because he'd hidden it. John refused to give that up.

John supposed that he was just lucky to have a house tailor-made to suit humanity's hero. But not for long. John put on an undershirt and shirt and dragged a pair of pants over his boxers. He'd hidden ever since he'd arrived. John assumed that the survivors from CASTLE base and the assault on the Unyielding Hierophant were still around, but he didn't know. John didn't know where to look or who to ask. He'd heard that Doctor Halsey was in prison. On a spaceship. He couldn't find her. He couldn't ask her.

This was the turning point, the point of no return. The emptiness had consumed him, and John couldn't get out. Not on his own. And the SPARTANs, his brothers and sisters, Halsey, his mother; he couldn't find them. They couldn't help him. But maybe, just maybe, he could find Cortana, and on the journey, find himself.

This, this was his penance. John had spent twenty-seven years fighting an enemy that was not evil. Just blind. He had failed to save them, had killed millions. The deaths hadn't bothered him, and they still didn't. Not really. He had killed them in the defence of Earth and all of her colonies. The problem wasn't that they were dead. It was far less tangible, far more difficult than that. But the problem had still killed out his soul, removed any shred of humanity he'd once had. Cortana had given that back. Well, sort of.

John would have to reforge his soul as a phoenix, let it rise out of ash as he burnt away his dead husk of a soul. And there was only one way to do that. Cortana had told him that once. Legend had it that this is a realm of forges of soul. A journey with a purpose, climbing the peak to salvation, that would burn away the dead and smelt a soul, a true, human soul, out of an old one. Man could not live on a journey forever, but soul thrived and came alive and in a journey

that meant something, something personal, a journey to find loved ones once lost, soul could be entirely reborn. So ran legends. They spoke of heros whose souls were murdered by the violence, the needless pain, the senseless slaughter. The legends spoke of war heros whose only purpose was to begin anew, to, in the fires of a dying soul, smelt for themselves a new one, a better one. John wanted to be one of those, a legend who found his humanity.

For the first time in three days, John had purpose. He startled his neighbours as he opened the front door. They were doing normal, mundane things like watering and weeding gardens; they all stopped and crowded around to meet their new, reclusive neighbour. John figured they had no clue of his identity. He was polite, telling them he had business to attend to, but still they pressed him. At last, he had to resort to pushing through the requests to dine and offers of a casserole. It was how normal people acted when they met other normal people, John supposed. But then again, he wasn't normal.

Judging by the sun, it was about 10:30. John walked around the side of his new house and climbed into the modified Warthog. Although it masqueraded as a civilian car, civilian cars couldn't sustain his weight. If he drove quickly, John could get to the base before the night crew arrived and all access was restricted. John gunned the engine and pulled out of the driveway and onto Greenhill Street, causing his new neighbours to scatter before they were hit. John ignored them and started driving toward his MJOLNIR suit. All he had was the shirt, pants, and, of course, Cortana's empty data matrix on a chain on his neck. He wouldn't put it in his head. Not until Cortana came with the matrix. Still, what he had was not enough to set off on a trek to find Cortana and himself. He at least needed his armour, battered and worn as it was.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Short, I know, but this is a just a bit of set-up. How did it go? Should I continue to detail John's journey? Remember that reviews help me to write better.\*\*

## 2. Military Hardware

\*\*A/N: I'm getting a lot of positive feedback in a surprisingly short amount of time (especially considering how short the intro was). Maybe it's just because I'm finally writing something mainstream. In any case, the feedback is lovely, and so I shall reward thy good behaviour with another chapter. I hope you (the Internet) enjoy it.\*\*

\*\*And yes, I now realize that the trailer isn't actually Halo: 5, maybe not even planned to be part of any game at all. But it still looks cool, and I will still try to predict the Halo: 5 game. Still trying to decide whether or not to put in a scene as shown by the trailer. However, considering that 343i has confirmed that\*\* \*\*4, 5, and 6 will be about saving John, not necessarily the galaxy (although he might save that, too), this story \*\*\*\*\_will\_\*\*\*\* roll in a slightly more personal direction.\*\*

\*\*Let me explain a few things about the SPARTAN-IIs and IIIs. Those that survived and turned down the offer to be inducted into the SPARTAN-IVs went into voluntary retirement with military-proved

houses and even psychologists (if they wanted them) to have a chance at a normal life. They live in (relative) seclusion with specially designed houses (and retirement funds provided by the UNSC). Because they don't have a libido, they live in groups with the SPARTANs they worked incredibly closely with. They still have issues relating to their being drafted at age six, and so they must support each other as they try to become "human" again.\*\*

\*\*John is in a regular neighbourhood because the UNSC hasn't yet had a chance to build his house, and the reason he is (was) in seclusion will be discussed.\*\*

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\* \* \*

><p>Military Hardware<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Year Four of Voluntary Retirement<p>

Kelly set down her drink. She turned to Linda. "Did you hear? John is back."

Linda, who was watching Fred do laps in the outdoor pool, turned to Kelly. "Then why isn't he with us? We're his family. We can help him get over the war. Goodness knows that we only survived because we had each other."

Kelly nodded and crossed over to the bar. "Yes, but he also had an A.I. living in his head for a while. If part of your psyche was ripped out, could you face anyone?"

"No. Isolation will be good for him. He can sort out just what is left of his mind without trying to deal with anyone else's thoughts and opinions."

Linda nodded. I understand the logic of him not living with us or Grey Team, but I still want to see him. He needs to know that we're out here when he's ready."

Kelly shrugged and walked over to the door. With one hand on the handle, she asked, "Should I tell Fred?" Linda nodded, so Kelly tugged open the door. It was heavy enough that a normal human would have to push with his or her shoulder to get it to swing open. That and other modifications made the house harder for a SPARTAN to break. Those modifications (and the three SPARTANs living there) also turned the house into an unbreachable fortress.

Kelly walked outside. Rather than trying to get Fred's attention by yelling, she jumped into the pool, clothes and all. She landed right in his way, forcing him to stop swimming his laps. Fred stood up and asked, "Do you mind, Kelly? I'm trying to swim."

Kelly grinned like a deranged maniac before replying. "Why you swim, I don't know. The armour weighs a ton, so I never learned how to swim flutterby."

Fred knew this was going somewhere he shouldn't interrupt, but he couldn't resist correcting Kelly. "Butterfly. And it's good for your arms and legs and abdomen. Better to get it all in at once than having to work out all three muscle groups with different sets of weights that aren't even mass-produced."

"So it works all your muscles. It's still bloody difficult to learn and takes way too much energy when a simpler stroke would work."

"That's the point. Most swimmers have difficulty swimming two hundred metres butterfly."

Kelly snorted and leaned in close, lowering her voice. "Then why have you been swimming \_butterfly\_ nonstop since you entered the pool?"

Fred grinned, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. Rather, they seemed to go dark as he said, "Because I'm a SPARTAN."

Kelly quickly caught his meaning and got to the point. "Speaking of SPARTANs, did you hear?"

Fred shook his head. "Hear what? I have water in my ears."

"John is back."

This time, the smile brightened Fred's eye. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Both SPARTANs turned as the patio door opened with a small \_click\_. As she stepped through the doorway, Linda hoisted her sniper rifle and waved two fingers over her faceplate. "For you two to suit up."

\* \* \*

><p>Day Three of Required Civilian Reintegration<p>

The Warthog skidded through the gate, fishtailing as John grappled with the wheel in an attempt to regain control of the vehicle. It finally stopped not seven centimetres from the face of an off-duty air traffic controller pressed against the wall. John stepped out of the modified Warthog. He walked calmly to the nearest bunker and opened the door.

John was faced with a SPARTAN-IV in a purple Warrior variant of Mark VI GEN-2 armour. The SPARTAN had both arms extended, an assault rifle leveled. The soldier clearly wasn't expecting John, because although the alarms had informed the soldier that someone had gone through the gate without authority, they couldn't say who. John acted.

The SPARTAN-IV was probably paralyzed; he'd finally found someone taller than himself. John slammed his arm into the SPARTAN-IV's. The impact was far more jarring than John was used to, but John gritted his teeth and moved his other hand underneath the assault rifle. He caught it as it fell and kicked the SPARTAN in the upper chest. John knew from experience that the MJOLNIR armour was bulky enough that being thrown off-balance like that was incredibly jarring, so he

capitalized on it by dropping into a two-legged sweep, knocking the SPARTAN-IV's legs away.

John stood up as fast as he could and leveled the rifle at the downed SPARTAN-IV. "Where is Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Sierra-117's MJOLNIR Mark VI armour?" John demanded.

The SPARTAN-IV groaned and said, "I don't know who you are, but you're clearly capable of operating a suit. What are you going to do with it?"

John stamped on the man's armoured chest. "I'm going to play detective." He applied more pressure to the SPARTAN's chest. "Where is it?"

"Okay. Okay! Storage block eight. Not sure where exactly, so please don't kill me."

John almost grinned as he slammed the butt of his rifle into the man's faceplate, rendering him unconscious. "Didn't you know?" he said, "SPARTANs never die." John stripped the SPARTAN of his grenades, secondary weapon-a shiny .22 Magnum-and extra ammunition. John was just glad his cargo pants could hold it all.

John turned and walked out the door just in time to see the air traffic controller finish talking into a radio. "Yeah, big guy. I'd send in the Marines, sir." There was an unintelligible crackle as the radio answered. John took a step closer in an attempt to eavesdrop, but the controller whipped around and spotted him. The controller shouted, "Shit! He came back out!"

John ran forward, automatically switching to the pistol for better performance over long ranges. Without the HUD of his armour, John couldn't get a lock; luckily, he had practice with iron sights. John aimed and smoothly pulled the trigger, rolling into the recoil. The controller fell, leg disabled.

John continued to run closer, gun aimed in case the air traffic controller has a concealed handgun. After a moment, John switched his sights to the radio, fully ready to shoot it out. Before he could pull the trigger, the radio started talking again. John was close enough to hear it this time. "He walked out? But SPARTAN Carroll is scheduled to patrol that area.

"Don't worry. The Marines will get him with the training bullets. We'll paralyze him so that we can interrogate him. We are quite . . . persuasive." The radio crackled off. John checked his loads to see if they too had paint rounds.

They did. \_At least\_, John reflected grimly, \_I won't kill anyone, and these grenades are probably only flashbangs\_.

John took a look around the radio station, hoping for a map of some sort. As John shuffled around, the air traffic controller began to moan and thrash. The paint on his leg was starting to wear off, even if the controller wouldn't be back on his feet for another half-an-hour. John pointed the paint gun and said, "If you don't tell me where storage block eight is, I will not hesitate to beat you to death."

The man groaned and mumbled. John put a foot on the man's chest and pressed. "Okay! Um . . . go straight and then go right at the second crossing and then . . . then go until the third left and the . . . eighth left and then right right away and then you're there."

"Thank you." John squeezed his finger and watched as the bullet splashed a globule of red paint onto the air traffic controller's face. He jerked once and then lay still. John took his foot off the controller and started running.

John looked for the first side passage. It wasn't hard to find. Marines poured through the opening, rifles ready. But they were too far away. John supposed that if he was normal, the Marines would have a fair chance. But even with iron sights, John was a better shot. He pumped round after paralyzing round into the sea of Marines, which was still too far away to do anything more than fire blindly.

John aimed again and pulled the trigger. \_Click. Click\_. John didn't hesitate. He swapped to the assault rifle and fired a covering burst before rolling behind an ammunition crate. John pulled the empty mag out of the pistol and grabbed another from his pocket. With practiced ease, he slammed the magazine in and jumped over the box and out of cover.

As John slid over the top of the crate, he aimed and fired with inhuman precision. Relying on speed and surprise, John dashed forward, emptying the gun into the few Marines still standing. As soon as the enemy fire began to close in on John, he dropped onto his shoulder, rolling right and switching weapons at the same time. He came up firing and the final Marines ate hot paint.

John didn't stop to scrounge ammunition. More Marines would be on the way soon, and John wanted his armour.

John rounded the first corner and faced off with another SPARTAN-IV, this one in blue Operator armour. This time, he didn't have the element of surprise, and a hail of paint bullets filled the air. Two struck John before he could get behind the corner. Grimly, he looked at his left side. His hip was completely numb, and so was his upper thigh. Most people wouldn't be able to walk with a numb leg, but most people weren't SPARTANs. John watched his leg as he took a couple of steps, making sure he could retain his gait without sensory information from his leg.

With a moment of practice, John could confidently walk on flat ground even though his leg was quickly falling asleep. He peered out from cover, unconsciously transferring his gun to his left hand. As he peered out to fire, a sharp \_crack\_ ripped through the base and a sniper bullet buried itself right next to the SPARTAN-IV's right foot. The spray of cracked concrete showed that the bullet was not a training round. The SPARTAN-IV shouted, "Shit! Sniper!" presumably at Marines behind her, before running right next to the wall the bullet had come over. Unless the sniper was able to switch positions, the SPARTAN-IV would be safe. John pressed himself against the wall as well, just in case the sniper turned his scope onto John.

The SPARTAN-IV's suit crackled with the telltale sound of a signal from another suit. A different female voice, one John didn't think he'd hear again-even if just over a radio-said quietly, almost whispered, really, "Oly Oly Oxen Free." John smiled, knowing that the

sniper wasn't gunning for him or the SPARTAN-IV-Linda could have plugged the SPARTAN-IV even when the IV was running at full tilt. But the SPARTAN-IV didn't recognise the voice, couldn't know that she was safe. John capitalised on that fact when he ran into the open, firing paint rounds at the SPARTAN-IV, who didn't have much room to dodge. The SPARTAN groaned as the paint messed with her armour's systems, the paint having been designed to function when SPARTANs used the training rounds. Once the enemy was dispatched, John walked into the open and passed two fingers over his mouth, knowing that Linda would get the message.

Behind the frozen SPARTAN, there weren't many Marines. As John mowed through them, Linda sowing discord with carefully placed sniper rounds, he found himself idly wondering what the O.N.I. brass in charge of the base were thinking. A single middle-aged man wading through an army of Marines and even a pair of SPARTANs teamed up with a crack sniper who was very carefully not shooting anyone. All that could only be made more confusing by the loss of light as evening set on.

John shot the Marine that had just popped out of cover with his assault rifle, painting his stomach red. When one of the Marines hurled a flashbang into his direction, John ducked into cover behind one of the barriers the Marines had erected and started to reload. He heard one of the Marines shout, probably into a radio, "Sir, we found the sniper, but not one of the three Marine squads I sent up there has returned. Permission to send more." John stood up and shot the Marine in the head three times.

The radio gave the Marine instructions anyway. "Negative. We have most of the Marines out in force to stop that bogey, but another one has appeared. It's like a ghost, and none of the kill squads have come back. Our forces are spread too thinly."

John grinned predatorily, because although their picture had gotten murkier, his was getting clearer and clearer. He shot the two remaining Marines and grabbed their ammunition.

John was at the final stretch, but Marines were swarming from every side path that John didn't take. He replaced his assault rifle with a battle rifle when a paint bullet caught his right shoulder. He could still wiggle his fingers, but John needed one-handed weapons in order to shoot with accuracy.

Night finished falling as John advanced to the seventh right. The eighth left was only fifty metres away, but the swarms of Marines stretched the distance into a few kilometres. John fingered one of the grenades he had stripped off of the SPARTAN-IV. It was dark. The flashbang (if that was what it was) would be effective enough that John could probably cut through the remainder. To be safe, he lobbed one over the heads of the first Marines before rolling a second right into the front lines. John backpedaled, slamming his eyes shut and clapping his hands over his ears. He saw a miniature sun through his eyelids and heard a muffled thunder. John cracked his eyes open and saw Marines groaning, laying down, kneeling, as they clasped hands over ears and squeezed eyes shut.

John shot nearly indiscriminately at the groaning Marines, ensuring that they stayed down when the effects wore off. He waded through them, heading to the eighth left. At last, he came to his turn and



took it. The bunker marked storage block eight stood before him. It was a small, squat building. Searching it wouldn't take very long. John pulled open the door and stepped into the air conditioned interior.

A pair of muzzles greeted him. Attached to each muzzle was an assault rifle. Two SPARTAN-IVs held the assault rifles. One wore purple Warrior armour and the other was swathed in grey Venator armour. The one in purple spoke. "Thanks for telling us where you were going. You are under arrest for breaking into an O.N.I. secure facility. Put your hands above your head and prepare to be jailed."

John smiled-he'd seen something flitting in the shadows. "No. Oly Oly Oxen Free."

"What?" The SPARTAN-IVs' heads slammed together and a suit of MJOLNIR Mark VI armour stepped out from behind the two downed SPARTAN-IVs.

"Good to see you, John."

"Good to see you too, Kelly. Where's Fred?"

"Guarding Linda. Now, let's get your suit on. You look naked without it."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Yeah, training rounds in a military base seems a bit odd, but don't forget that they work incredibly reliably, O.N.I. would want to interrogate anyone who entered illegally, and for gameplay purposes, John needs to be able to take a few hits before collapsing.\*\*

\*\*For those of you interested, the first chapter would be a video, as would the scene at Blue Team's house. Gameplay would begin when John steps out of the modified Warthog, and an interactive cut scene to teach you how to play would go up until after the interrogation of the air traffic controller is over. Linda's shot would be a quick video, and the end video would begin as soon as John gets in the MJOLNIR storage room. John won't have a HUD until he gets into his armour, so at the beginning of the next level.\*\*

\*\*As always, please inform me of any spelling mistakes, factual errors, or general problems. Tell me what you liked and didn't like, because that lets me improve my writing.\*\*

### 3. Invasion

\*\*A/N: Yeah, yeah, I'm slow. I blame the 200 butterfly longcourse I swam. Sorry. Please enjoy.\*\*

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><p>Invasion<p>

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### ><p>Day Three of Required Civilian Reintegration<p>

John flexed his hand, ensuring that the suit still worked. He was just lucky that storage bay eight had a MJOLNIR Mark VI Suit Placement/Removal Device. It felt good to be back in MJOLNIR armour, even if his was scarred, scratched, and too large for just one person. John was too used to two people in the suit, even if it was skin-tight.

Kelly tested the COM. "Chief. You there?"

"I've been honourably discharged. Not Chief anymore. But yeah, I hear you."

John heard static for a moment before Linda came on: "We know that you need some time, John, but come with us; we have all the comforts of a genuine military barracks."

John almost grinned at that before following Kelly up to Linda and the Warthog. With military forces neutralised, the escape from the facility was easy. Kelly sprinted ahead, paving the way to her insertion point and John followed behind, just a little slower.

\* \* \*

### ><p>Day One of Exodus<p>

A transport Warthog with four SPARTANs screeched to a halt inside a large garage. A pair of Warthogs, one with a normal LAAG turret, and one with a gauss cannon, were parked next to the transport Warthog. John stepped off of the back of the modified Warthog, as did Linda. Fred jumped out of the driver's seat and Kelly hopped out of the passenger's side.

The four walked into the house and headed downstairs to the armoury. As Fred stepped into the Suit Placement/Removal Device, courtesy of the SPARTAN-IV program, he said, "John, we know that you will need some time alone, try to sort through your problems, so don't worry about that."

Linda pulled off her helmet, revealing her striking red hair and unlined face. She didn't look any older than when John had last seen her. Fred looked fairly similar underneath his own helmet, which was quickly removed by the machine. The biggest change was a slight weathering of the face; if possible, Fred had even less fat on his face. Linda spoke. "We have an weapons depot here. Feel free to take some weapons and ammo. Take our ship and go where you need to, do what you need to. Just remember that we'll be here waiting when you get back."

Kelly grinned. John just knew she was grinning. "Follow me."

Kelly lead the way, still in full MJOLNIR armour. Once she opened the door to the rest of the house, she removed her own helmet, cradling it in her arms. "Stay here as long as you wish-we have several spare rooms. Everything is reinforced for SPARTANs; we can jump off the stairs in full armour and not worry about denting the floor. Our ship

is up these stairs."

As Kelly turned and started climbing a rickety looking staircase, John pulled off his own helmet and asked, "So why do you have a spaceship?"

Kelly turned to answer. Noticing how John eyed the stairs, she laughed. "John, these stairs are perfectly sturdy. Haul your ass up here." An infinitesimal moment later, her blue eyes hardened and she screamed, "That's an order, soldier." John reluctantly started to climb the steps before Kelly continued. "We pitched in and bought the ship-really, it's more of a space yacht-with our pensions just in case we ever decided to go cruising the stars; visit Reach or Harvest. We'd have to get a slipspace drive for it, though."

"They were glassed," John stated bluntly.

Kelly was quick to respond. "I guess you didn't hear. Terraforming is underway."

John looked up at her as the duo climbed the stairs. "Terraforming is very limited. One of the only successful planetary engineering techniques humanity has achieved so far is ecopoiesis, and I'm fairly certain that putting plants onto a ball of molten slag that the Covenant vitrified during the war won't make it habitable. We use already habitable worlds for a reason, Kelly."

Kelly snorted and stepped off the stairs. "The Elites-the ones that aren't part of the Storm Covenant-have all those Forerunner toys, so when a human activates the more interesting parts, all sorts of new toys are discovered, including a terraformer. I don't know how it works, but it does. Reach is mostly livable again."

There was silence as the two SPARTANs climbed a second set of stairs to the roof while John contemplated Kelly's words.

The roof overlooked a leafy pasture. Dappled light filtered through the trees dotted around the house. No other buildings were within view. As beautiful as the scenery around the mansion (for the house was indeed a mansion) was, John was more attracted to what sat on the roof. A ship clearly designed for pleasure sat on the roof. John recognised it as a \_Galatea\_-class luxury cruiser. Unlike most human ships, it was fairly organic in design. Made out of dark-almost black-steel, it was shaped like a flat fish; an elliptical body with two long, sweeping wings grafted smoothly to the sides. There were no dorsal fins, and the tail was simply a pair of elegant, stylised thrusters. Stenciled on the side was the name of the ship: \_Farewell to the Undying\_.

John lightly rapped the side of the ship, resulting in a soft \_thud\_. "Farewell to the Undying?" he queried.

Kelly nodded sagely. "SPARTANs never die," was her only explanation, but it was plenty for John.

John slipped on his helmet and walked to the armoury. He took as much as he could carry and loaded it onto \_Farewell to the Undying\_. Fred and Linda followed him out onto the roof, staying there with Kelly as he lifted off and headed to space. The SPARTANs never smiled or waved. They just stood there watching until the ship was long gone

from their vision.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Exodus<p>

The ship had no weapons and no slipspace drive. John would have to find a better ship, preferably one that could be flown by one person. John doubted that a civilian ship would willingly visit the places he would need to. But first, he spent a few minutes adjusting himself to the controls.

After a few minutes, John was doing flips, barrel rolls, and had even figured out just how much forward thrust was required to come to a complete stop. At that moment, a message crackled over the civilian radio. "Attention all ships: sensors register numerous unplanned slipspace ruptures. This is believed to be a surprise attack. Civilian ships must return to dock. Military ships, brace for action; we have an invasion on our hands."

John was just about to curse his bad luck when he realised that the invading ships must have slipspace drives. He headed out of Earth's orbit, monitoring the chatter. "Ships hiding behind Jupiter . . . warming up super MACs . . . assume defensive position delta . . . \_Infinity\_ turning about . . . most civilian ships in . . . Wait! One is heading \_toward\_ the slipspace ruptures."

A new voice, one that John recognised immediately, came onto the COM. "Attention \_Farewell to the Undying\_. This is Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood, and I order you to return. An invasion force is heading our way. We don't need any civilian casualties."

John moved his gloved hand to the COM panel and hit the reply button. "With all due respect, sir, I cannot obey that order. Don't worry; you won't have any civilian casualties." Lord Hood seemed to recognise the voice, because he didn't say anything further. John just punched the controls and headed toward Jupiter.

John piloted \_Farewell to the Undying\_ around Jupiter's many moons, some, like Callisto, far larger than others. After a little fancy flying, John landed on the Jovian side of Io, the fifth closest moon. Unlike the other three inner moons, which, admittedly, he could land on, Amalthea was also big enough to hide on, but without Cortana to run the calculations, John didn't want to risk landing on a chunk of rock that orbited the largest planet in the Sol system in just over eleven hours. So he settled for hiding behind Io.

John didn't have to wait very long. Covenant ships began rounding Jupiter a short moment later, likely once all of the ships had emerged from slipspace. John waited for the first few to pass before powering on the engines, just a bit. John wasn't sure if there was a god up among the stars somewhere, or just his usual luck, but he prayed. He prayed to the gods of his namesakes, the gods of the first Spartans; to the Christian God he just barely remembered his mother-his birth mother, not his real mother-teaching him about; to the Librarian that was the goddess of the Covenant-especially to her, ironic as that seemed, because he knew that she was (or had been) real, alive, tangible, and that she was watching out for him.

In any case, the Covenant didn't notice John's engines against the

backdrop of the stars. And their own engines. John carefully flew \_Farewell to the Undying\_ near one of the ships. The timing would be tricky, as would the flying. John hoped no one looked out the window while he flew next to the ship. Without weapons, he couldn't get inside the ship, so he'd have to wait for the shields to be taken down some other way. An electromagnetic pulse from a nuke or a glancing blow from a MAC shot would be needed because a direct shot would core the Covenant ship and John's ship couldn't slip through the tiny distortions of the energy shield when the plasma batteries fired. But he also needed \_Farewell to the Undying\_ in order to keep up with the Covenant.

After only a moment of flying, the ships were in range of the MACs. Technically, they were \_always\_ in range, but the Covenant was now at the distance where dodging would be impossible. The lead ship splintered, having been pierced by a chunk of ferrous metal with a depleted uranium core going at an impressive percentage of the speed of light.

Whoever commanded the invasion clearly hadn't anticipated that result. Chaos ensued as the Covenant ships tried desperately to dodge the broken ship and next set on incoming fire. John rolled and swerved to dodge both ships and the fire they tried to attack Earth with. Unfortunately for them, they couldn't control magnetic fields from so far away; the plasma dissipated before getting to Luna.

And then John had an idea. A crazy, stupid, risky idea. But really, which of his ideas weren't? He flew \_Farewell to the Undying\_ right up to the bridge of one of the nearest ships. To his surprise, it was manned by Brutes. He hadn't seen any Brutes in the Storm Covenant, so he supposed that this was a separate faction entirely. Admittedly, that would make his plan far easier.

One of the Brutes looked up and snorted in shock. It growled and the Brute with silvery hair responded. It gave a guttural roar and the ship's point defence lasers aimed, all of them at once. John hated to ruin \_Farewell to the Undying\_, but he wouldn't be coming back for a while. Maybe Linda, Fred, and Kelly would forgive him.

The lasers began to cut through \_Farewell to the Undying\_'s hull. John used the ship for cover as he ejected, grabbing only an assault rifle, pistol, C-12 satchel, and jetpack. He waited a moment to get clear of the wreckage before activating the jetpack. John flew to the origin of the lasers, relying on fancy flying just as much as his shields. Once inside the rather sizeable gap in the shields, John stuck the C-12 on the metal. He quickly broadcast, "This is Sierra-117. Do not destroy this ship. Repeat, do not destroy this ship." Although there was no response, MAC shells began firing a little further away from his position.

Using the metallic clamps, John crawled hand-over-hand until he was a fair distance away. John depressed the detonator and watched as the side of the ship lit up. The blast was contained and amplified by the shields, which had sprung back up once the lasers had finished eating \_Farewell to the Undying.\_

John hand-walked back to the ragged hole. He jumped in and felt his gravitational centre shift from almost nonexistence to the floor of the ship. He landed in a crouch with a solid \_thud\_. For now, the hallway he was in was clear. The blips on his radar, however,

suggested that that would change very quickly. John drew the .50 pistol and crept behind a brace in the wall.

Peeking around the corner, John saw a small clutch of Grunts in EVA suits coming to investigate the hole he'd made. Perfect. The little guys scared easily, listened to whoever had the biggest gun. And John had the biggest gun. He leveled the gun and pulled the trigger smoothly, watching as a Grunt fell. John began to aim at his next target before the first Grunt landed. The next Grunt fell, and John felt a pang of some sort, dulled by the metallic layers around his heart. John realised that he had been listening for the sounds Cortana played, the birthday party whenever he shot a Grunt in the head. John shook his head and pulled the trigger again; the third Grunt died.

The final Grunt was running in circles, hands thrown up in fear. John emerged from hiding and leveled his assault rifle at the Grunt. He chinned the translator and started speaking alien. "Pull up a map of the ship and mark the bridge for me, or else I'll blow your brains out. The Grunt stopped, looked around a moment and ran over to the nearest console. It tapped a few buttons, causing a holographic map of the ship to pop up. A blue blinking dot represented John's position. A green one showed the bridge. John marked the location on his HUD, taking note of the shortest route. He thanked the Grunt and peppered its midsection with bullets, carefully avoiding the brain.

John reoriented himself and set off at a swift jog. For the first minutes, he didn't meet any enemies. Just empty hallways. So when John came to the first hangar, he was understandably wary. John stepped forward cautiously, and the doors opened with a soft \_whoosh\_. But none of the patrolling Covenant noticed. Jackals patrolled on the upper walkway, energy shields held at their sides. Grunt technicians pushed boxes around on the floor. Engineers floated above, repairing Phantoms and Spirit drop ships for a few Brute overseers. There were no Elites or Hunters in sight.

John considered sneaking past, but without Active Camo, the Grunts, dumb as they were, would most certainly spot him. John fingered a plasma grenade he'd collected from a dead Grunt and threw it. The nearest Brute roared in surprise before superheated plasma stripped him of his shields and atomised him. As the Grunts and Jackals ran over to see what was wrong, John took the opportunity to neutralise them.

When his field of vision was clear, John stepped out of the doorway and into a vicious firefight. The Grunts and Jackals quickly adjusted their aim while the Brutes leapt to the floor, spikers in hand. A pair of Engineers stopped what they were doing and began casting shields for the Covenant. John mentally groaned and began to shoot, subconsciously sidestepping plasma, needles, and spikes when he could. John advanced through the room, eventually swapping his magnum for a needler. The Covenant never stood a chance; the Demon had earned his nickname for a reason.

As John knifed a fleeing Grunt, a lone Brute looked around and realised that it was all alone. It did the sensible thing. It charged. Time slowed down. John flashed an arm up barely in time to block the Brute's blow. His arm went numb. The Brute rammed its fist into John's stomach. His shields collapsed, but rather than trying to

stand the blow, he let himself be flung backward. This time, John was ready. As the Brute charged for the second time, John tensed his legs. The Brute roared, and he jumped, twisting in midair. The Brute tried to check his momentum, scrambling backward. John reached his legs out and wrapped them around the beast's neck. As he fell, the neck twisted with a resounding crack. A pool of blood leaked out of the monster's neck and John stepped over it heading for the exit.

But word had spread of an intruder, and the hallways were choked with Drones, Jackals, Grunts, and the occasional Brute. John spent most of his ammo chasing Drones and trying to hit Jackals cowering behind their shields. However, all their effort came to naught, and at the end of every gore-filled hall, John, wrapped in death and swathed in the aegis of demons, stood triumphant.

At last, he reached the bridge. The doors slid open, revealing a silver Brute dressed in highly ceremonial-although perfectly useful-black and red armour. Gravity hammer in hand, the Brute stood at attention. When one of his comrades attempted to stand up as well, the chieftain whirled and snarled, "No, Zevannus. The Demon is mine. He revealed to us the lies of the San 'Shyuum, and for that we thank him.

"But this, this is why Ullumaeus brought our pack together. We shall kill the Demon and win honour among the pack. The snivelling Sangheili shall grovel at our feet once our fleet has killed both the Demon and the Arbiter, and the rest shall join them. We shall be the leaders of a new age! We shall not quest for transcendence; the Covenant is abolished. We quest for power, for we are the Valkyries! We escort all those who stand against us onto the Path of the Great Journey!"

John suspected that his translator was having trouble giving direct translations for some of the words, notably this Brute-led Covenant "the Valkyries". However, he didn't have time to dwell on it-the chieftain was charging. John rolled to dodge the hammer and checked his weapons. His pair of spikers were down to their last rounds. The plasma pistol John had picked up was down to twenty-two percent charge, barely enough for a single electromagnetic pulse burst. A plan began forming in John's head. It was risky, but, with a little luck (which John had plenty of), it would work.

He began overloading the plasma pistol as he jumped out of the way of the chieftain's next rush. He held it while the Brute turned, and fired it when the ape moved to charge him. The green bolt caught the beast in the chest, and John saw its shields flicker and die. He tossed the plasma pistol away, scooping up the discarded spiker and pulling the other one off his back nearly simultaneously.

Then John rushed the charging monster, catching it off guard. After all, who would expect even a demon to attack a gravity hammer wielding beast? That moment of disorientation was short, but plenty for John. He dropped to the floor, using all his momentum to slide underneath the monster. John emptied both spikers into the Brute's groin before jabbing the bayonets on the guns there as well, where they stuck, quivering. And then John threw his last grenade at the Brute, sticking it in the back.

The very angry bridge crew was easy to deal with once John had

obtained the chieftain's gravity hammer.

Stepping over the last Brute carcass, John began punching in vectors and coordinates, trying to remember what he'd seen Cortana do. Halo 04 was gone, Installation 05 had no secrets, and John didn't know the location of the Ark or of Requiem. So he plugged in the symbols he'd seen aboard the Litch. After all, Gamma Halo had been the resting place for the Composer, essentially an A.I. matrix generator. Perhaps the answers he sought lay hidden in the tranquil oceans or verdant forests of a superweapon floating in deep space.

A circular rip in the fabric of space appeared, and John's ship drifted through it.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Yeah, that's right. Two factions of neo-Covenant, and they both hate each other. Gameplaywise, dual wielding is back, you fly the ship, run through the halls starting once you get the HUD data from the fourth Grunt, and kill up until you enter the bridge. Once the chieftain rushes you, you get to play until all the Brutes are dead.\*\*

\*\*If anyone has noticed, I slip Valkyries into my stories a bit, but they are really neat and fit the Haloverse's affinity for mythology quite well.\*\*

\*\*Remember, tank beats everything (so naturally, there will be a tank level). Except reviews. Please note any discrepancies in the story, whether they be grammatical, factual, or logical. Thank you, and have a great day. We appreciate your business.\*\*

#### 4. Gamma Halo

\*\*A/N: It takes seven days because Forerunner slipspace is insanely fast compared to Covenant. Please enjoy.\*\*

\*\*And I've never received a positive review that also mentions Greg Bear and Karen Traviss (or negative review mentioning them, for that matter) before, so this is a quick thank you to FergieG021.\*\*

\*\*Disclaimer: I am in no way affiliated with Microsoft, Bungie, or 343 Industries. This is for my enjoyment and, hopefully, the enjoyment of others. I do not receive a profit.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Gamma Halo<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Day Seven of Exodus<p>

John was bored. He'd never realised just how little there was to do in slipspace. He didn't like cryo, but a week of nothing to do was worse than having flavourless goop and the feeling of missed times, missed lives, the feeling of helplessness. Worse, the boredom could not be alleviated with a book, because the MJOLNIR armour could only



translate the spoken word. Indeed, the only useful information John had uncovered was the name of the ship, referenced in multiple saved logs. It had, as near as John could tell, been christened \_Truth of the Nebulae \_before being renamed \_Nebular Orphan.\_

Suddenly, klaxons blared, and the indefinable feeling of slipspace, of existing in eleven dimensions, faded out. John almost grinned as he ran to the bridge. He peered out the window.

Stars in their multitudes populated space. That was the first thing he noticed. The second was a planet, ruddy from the light of a faraway sun. Third was the asteroid belt with a decrepit space station floating like just another piece of rubble. It didn't look deserted until John spent a few moments studying the windows, looking for shadows he knew he'd never find; the rend made for the Composer to slip through must have been on the backside.

But most impressive, most elegant, was the Halo. John knew it was going to be there; he'd seen it before. He'd walked the surface of two others; watched as they too had appeared, drifting in the shadows of planets, looking like delicate wedding bands, and seeming as deadly. The Forerunner architecture, archaic and surreal and ultramodern all at once, was breathtaking, even for a SPARTAN. The Halo was primordial and deadly. But the Halo was also beautiful in a way that bespoke of things as yet unmade, things that would not exist, not for another million years. Yet here it was. And here John was.

Unwilling to leave \_Nebular Orphan \_floating in space to be picked up on sensors, John flew his hands over the controls, grateful for once for the lessons on Covenant technology he'd been required to take. Until now, all John had had to do with Covenant technology was point it and shoot. Because John wasn't sure where information as to an A.I. recovery system would be, he just aimed \_Nebular Orphan\_ at the ring's inside. He fired the engines, sending the ship into a decaying orbit aimed at the surface of Halo 03.

After the crash, John stepped out of one of the hangars, spiker ready and plasma pistol at his hip. Nothing waited for him, but that didn't let him lower his guard, especially since he'd seen purple ships dropping out of slipspace as he started his crash. John cautiously waded through the halcyon sea of lush greenery as it whipped through the wind. Mountains encircled the area and a glimmering sea could be seen through the vales at the bases of mountains facing the edge of the ring several kilometres off. The first thing John did was inspect the crash site. If he'd had autopilot, John would have simply stolen a Banshee and flown out. Instead, he had to settle for a Ghost that had miraculously survived a long tumble to the surface.

Experience with mythical alien artifacts had taught John that the important stuff was underground, and that the Covenant knew their way around Forerunner systems and structures almost as well as Cortana. With a little luck, so would the Valkyries. John activated the boosters on his stolen Ghost in search of underground pathways or aliens to beat up for information.

Of course, the Valkyries found him first. Wraith mortar shot fell out of the sky, detonating with a resounding \_boom\_. John was knocked one way; the Ghost sailed another.

John leapt to his feet and whipped out his spiker. A clutch of Grunts could be heard squawking as they headed to inspect the blast site. Wishing he'd grabbed a cloaking device of some sort, John crept stealthily after them.

By the time the lead Grunt, whose name was Illipin, noticed that something was wrong, three of his compatriots had already been choked, stabbed, or punched to death. He ordered the last few Grunts to turn and fight just in time to see a green menace rise out of seeming nothingness. Two of the Grunts-the ones with normal, orange methane packs-broke and ran. Illipin, however, stood his ground. He'd been in several firefights with the splinter group Storm and had earned his rank, which was clearly shown by his red methane pack. Even as he aimed his plasma pistol at the Demon, not quite knowing what good it would do, Illipin thought he heard the Demon sigh with annoyance.

John hated when the little guys ran away. He shot two quick bursts at the fleeing Grunts before turning his attention back to the body of Grunts. The plasma washed over him almost hesitatingly, and John capitalised on his enemies' fear. He didn't even use the whole clip. And then he went Wraith hunting.

The Wraith was placed in front of a tunnel, but only a few enemies protected the Wraith itself: a pair of Brutes; some Jackals, including a poorly hidden sniper; and a band of resting Drones. John swapped to his plasma pistol and began charging the electromagnetic burst function. Once it was ready, John leapt out of cover and immobilised the Wraith before slamming into a Jackal. It was with some relief that he noticed a lack of genetic engineering in the Jackals, just as it had been absent in the Grunts. There were no strange, plated growths or extra sharp teeth; the Jackals and Grunts of the Valkyries hadn't been modified like the ones of the Storm had been.

John gored the Jackal with his spiker and continued forward, disabling the next Jackals with a few well timed bursts and the weight of his MJOLNIR armour. When a particle beam burnt away his shields, John turned a sharp pi radians and fired more hot spikes at the sniper.

By then, the Drones had woken up and, with their wings, had ascended to the small bluff the Jackals had formerly stood on. John chucked a plasma grenade into the middle of the tightly knit swarm before ducking away as the Wraith got a shot off. John peeked out after twin explosions and saw one Drone staggering, but alive. The rest had been incinerated if not once, then twice. John fired another overload at the Wraith before walking over to the Drone and stomping on its head, leaving a disgusting dark green stain on the grass.

John then dropped the plasma pistol and scooped up the beam rifle before disappearing into the foliage. He snuck around, looking for an overhang to snipe from without becoming a target for the Wraith. A little way from the tunnel, there was a large rock partially eroded by a stream. John crouched in the stream, back up against the rock. It would work well enough.

John peered into the electronic scope and moved the gun until the crosshairs sat on one of the Brutes, both of whom were glaring around as if daring John to come out and fight them. The Brute wore simple

dark blue armour, so John only had to squeeze off a single ionising beam, punching a neat hole through the Brute's head. The other Brute had barely the time to roar as he noticed his ally fall before John put a stream of ionising radiation through the Brute's head.

A teeth-rattling explosion informed John that the Wraith had figured out where he was, so John strafed back to the little overlook, shooting the beam rifle at the Wraith every chance he had. Once the gun clicked empty, John switched tactics. He grabbed a pair of fallen plasma pistols and ran into the open, overloading the Wraith's systems repeatedly as he closed on the behemoth of a vehicle.

John advanced around the Wraith until he could get at the engine. He climbed onto the back of the Wraith and shoved a plasma grenade into the cooling vent before hopping off. As John grabbed extra ammunition for his spiker and even took a second spiker, the grenade blew and the Wraith's engine went critical, destroying the vehicle with a second, larger explosion. John picked up the cloaking field one of the Brutes had been carrying and weighed it against the bubble shield that the other had dropped. Without an A.I. to sync alien technology with his suit, John wouldn't have armour abilities, so he'd have to rely on deployable field equipment. John hefted the cloaking field and dropped the bubble shield before making his way around the Wraith's husk and into the darkness of the ancient tunnel.

Sleek, burnished silver metal pulsed as veins of cool blue light ran throughout its interior, just below the surface of the enormous tunnel. John had seen Forerunners, and they were only a little taller than himself. Why they needed tunnels so much larger than themselves was beyond him, since the number of doorways that had to be opened meant that the tunnel was not some sort of underground expressway. John wouldn't have spent so much time questioning this, but without Cortana doing it, the space felt empty. John didn't like the empty feeling because it reminded him of friends lost to a war they had been drafted to fight. Fhajad, Li, Issac, Grace, the rest. It wasn't fair, but, as Cortana would have said, "There is no fairness in war. Death takes whomever he pleases." John sighed imperceptibly. The other problem was that the size of tunnels allowed him to be attacked en masse by charging packs of suicide Grunts without much room to manoeuvre. On the bright side, shooting the leaders resulted in massive chain reactions that could decimate the entire squad. That tactic didn't work as well when faced with an advancing squadron of Jackals. John quickly burnt through quite a bit of ammunition, even when he used grenades, dual-wielded plasma pistols, and any equipment he could scavenge.

At last, John came to an enormous underground cavern, far larger than the ones with simple pits and light bridges. Those rooms had been designed to be pits to stop a Flood outbreak through the tunnels, something the the Valkyries made use of, placing turrets, Brute kill squads, and even Hunter pairs at those bottlenecks. This cavern was much larger, and clearly more important. A central spire rose up in an attempt to meet a metal stalactite built into the ceiling, but both tapered into points only a few millimetres from each other. A brilliant cobalt spark floated between the two points. Strangely, the cavern was, unlike the others, devoid of any enemy presence. No turrets, no vehicles, no deployable energy fields, not even any enemies. Just silence.

John crouched to listen. And then he heard it. The terrified

chittering of Grunts, the anxious buzz of Drones as they shuffled their wings, the alarmed squawk of Jackals, the distinctly unsettling, guttural laughter of the Brutes-Cortana would have questioned laughter when the others were clearly worried. It was coming from the opposite end of the room. John started to sprint. There was only one thing he'd met that could produce such fear; only one thing that could scare this neo-Covenant, these Valkyries, worse than himself. And it terrified John, too. He was a SPARTAN, trained not to show fear, but that didn't stop the the terror. He had to stop the Valkyries before they did something rash.

There were no pits in the cavern, so John ran right up to the spire growing out of the floor, intent on crossing to the other side. The spark seemed larger up close, more a ball of whirling, untamed energy. There was almost no space between the tips of the spires and the blue orb. John flicked the magnification of his HUD up to its highest setting and watched as the tips of the roiling sphere contacted the tips of the spires. There was the barest moment's pause before the orb started a decaying undulation, expanding before shrinking to just a little smaller, the time between each undulation getting shorter and shorter. Naught but a swift moment later, the orb collapsed in on itself and a light blue wave reminiscent of the dust cast off by a supernova shot throughout the cavern. The burst passed through John with a slight tingle, and his armour suddenly started picking up a friendly radio transmission. "UNSC research base Kepler to unidentified UNSC IFF transponder. Repeat. Please identify yourself and confirm reason for Covenant invasion."

John didn't question it and simply replied as he pounded his way to the other end of the cavern. "This is Sierra-117." Technically accurate, since he wasn't Master Chief anymore, and doubted he could get used to being called John by people that weren't SPARTANS, Dr. Halsey, or Cortana. "I apologise, but I believe that this Covenant faction, which identifies itself as the Valkyries, followed me. Wait . . ."

Instinct took over, and John strained his ears as he dashed through the doors at the other end of the cavern. The sounds of terrified aliens had been replaced. And the odour. It snuck through his helmet and wormed its way through his nostrils. Terror. Complete, abject terror. The smell was otherwise indescribable (flesh rotting off of bone and bone rotting off of . . . something), but it made John want to turn and run, flee from the horrid, wet, squishing that was getting closer with every step. Although the new hallway was pristine, a sense of foreboding hung over John's head, as though each breath would be his last.

With a dangerous trepidation, John stepped hesitatingly through the last doorway. The sound, the smell, became fully more intense, and the feeling of something . . . slimy creeping up his spine appeared, even through his armour. John knew that it wasn't slimy, but the feeling remained. His tongue tasted leaden in a most peculiar sense. A fuzz seemed to grow on John's tongue, coating it in a death so intense that it could be tasted, far worse than rotten meat.

Sight was the last thing that John registered through the darkness of billions of spores drifting through the room. A Brute in broken armour stood over a pile of broken glass, a gaseous green mist hissing from vents in the floor and ceiling. It laughed before speaking. "We could not believe our luck when you came aboard. Your

death is our prize, and you have made it all too easy. We shall die, but we shall live forever, remembered as those with enough strength to kill the Demon!" The Brute drew a shaky breath and laughed one last time before collapsing.

And then they came, howling through the darkness. It was a nightmare from which John could not escape. His only consolation was the radio contact with research base Kepler. "The Flood!"

The man on the other end adopted a tone of disbelief. "What?"

"The Flood was their target. They have loosed it in an attempt to kill me. You need to start evacuation. A single Flood spore can destroy an entire galaxy. I need to destroy this Halo before the Flood can escape this ring."

John could almost hear the man's wary nod. "Alright. I'll try." The radio crackled once and then went silent.

John was alone in the darkness. Well, not alone. He was trapped in a room-the door had locked-trapped with a nightmare.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Outbreak<p>

John fought hard. But even SPARTANs have limits. He was getting exhausted, and munitions were running low quickly; the Flood kept coming, never-ceasing, never stopping, an unyielding tide that would come rushing, rushing, rushing, and sweep him out to sea. Some time later, seemingly arbitrarily, research base Kepler came on again. This time, a woman's voice rang like a half-forgotten rhyme through his head, eerily reminiscent of the voice of a friend, but just different enough not to be. "Research Base Kepler to Sierra-117. We are being overrun! Evacuation per your suggestion is underway, but we can't hold back the hostile forces. Flood, neo-Covenant, and . . . something else. Robots. We need your assistance before you destroy this Halo."

John wished he could be there. Anywhere but here. He turned on the COM. "On my way." He wasn't, not really. He was trapped in a sea of darkness.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Outbreak<p>

At last, an island. Golden rings appeared and metal poles that John dully recognised as Sentinels appeared. The Sentinels began firing, quickly smiting the Flood. A moment later, another set of golden rings appeared, teleporting a burnished metal sphere with an orange "eye" into the room. "Hello, Reclaimer. I am 049-Abject Testament. We must contain this outbreak. Please, follow me. We shall head to the Library and retrieve the Index." John waited a moment, ready for the nausea of teleporting. He wouldn't activate the Halo, but he also couldn't fight a Monitor in his current condition.

"Wait. The Index is missing." John's mind flashed to Ivanoff research station, to the room destroyed by a pair of Hunters. The Index had been in a glass case there, but John wasn't about to tell Abject

Testament that. "Do you know where the Index is, Reclaimer? We \_must\_ contain this outbreak as protocol dictates, but without the Index, we cannot follow protocol."

John relaxed a little before lying. "No, I don't know where the Index is. However, I do know how to contain the outbreak. Could you circumvent protocol to contain the outbreak?"

Abject Testament appeared to giggle a moment. "Of course. Containment is the most important part. My makers failed to have a proper protocol, so they could not contain the outbreak without drastic measures. But they contained it, for the outbreak \_must\_ be contained."

John nodded. "And I will contain it. But first, there is an outpost filled with Reclaimers."

Abject Testament floated up a few centimetres. "Yes! I met with them. Those Reclaimers were quite queer, wanting to take the Index before an outbreak occurred. I suppose they are simply being prepared, but it is not my duty to question my masters. Do you suppose that the Index is with them?" The Monitor seemed giddy with joy.

John quickly shook his head, getting quite impatient with the babbling Monitor. "No. But in order to try to contain the outbreak, I need to meet with those Reclaimers. Could you bring me to them?"

"But of course, Reclaimer. I shall send a contingent of Sentinels with you because I detect numerous Flood biosigns in that area." Once Abject Testament went quiet, golden rings wrapped around John and several Sentinels.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: How was my description of the Flood? How about Abject Testament? Please tell me how characterisation is going and help me correct any logic errors (like the brown cow did), spelling mistakes, or problems with grammar. Thank you!\*\*

\*\*And yeah, that's why you have armour abilities in Halo: 4, but not in Halo: 3. Reach has them because you're wearing high-tech experimental armour.\*\*

\*\*Gameplay: video until you step off of the ship, with a short video when you confront the Brute before fighting the Flood in a playable part up until Abject Testament comes. Cue another video.\*\*

## 5. Evacuation

\*\*A/N: As some of you may have noticed, this one is a bit later than I normally take to post updates because I was posting Deep Breath Before the Plunge. Also, it has come to my attention that some find the Chief's discharge a bit odd. I'd like to point out that Osman and Parangosky have been working on removing Halsey's influence for quite some time. So after the events of Halo: 4 (notably, MC's disregard for direct orders), I imagine they'd want to "retire" him; as humanity's hero, he can't exactly be taken into a dark alley and shot in the back-be made into an unperson, so "required civilian

reintegration" is the result.\*\*

\*\*Most of my stories have minor swearing used as descriptors or for emphasis, and shit is an occasional exclamation when surprised, scared, or in a bad situation. Hence, all my stories are rated T (not least because there's a fair bit of violence and also themes unsuitable for children). I apologise in advance because I believe that this marks my first use of \*fudge\*. ("Only I didn't say fudge. I said \_the\_ word, the big one, the queen-mother of dirty words, the F-dash-dash-dash word!"). It this offends your sensibilities, I am sorry. Please let me know if you think that \*fudge\* should push this story up to an M. I try to use swearing (especially the F-dash-dash-dash word) only as a careful enhancement, but you never know.\*\*

\*\*E-cookies if you can identify the quote's origin.\*\*

\*\*Anyway, please enjoy this extra-long chapter. If you don't, I will find out where you live, come to your house in the middle of the night, and turn on Rebecca Black's "Friday" before running out of the house (apartment, mobile home, whatever) covering my bleeding ears.\*\*

\*\*Disclaimer: I am in no way affiliated with Microsoft, Bungie, or 343 Industries. This is for my enjoyment and, hopefully, the enjoyment of others. I do not receive a profit.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Evacuation<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Outbreak<p>

After a momentary burst of golden light, John stumbled out of nothingness and into a brightly lit room. While it wasn't as bad as his first teleportation, John still felt the urge to throw up. He shook his head and looked around.

A pair of SPARTAN-IVs in shiny new Recruit armour stood, assault rifles leveled at John's form. One of the SPARTANs sported silver armour with cobalt trim. The other had lilac and ice blue armour. An older man with black hair, quite a few wrinkles, and a Sweet Williams cigar in his mouth stood over a holotable, peering at John and the Sentinels.

John shifted, and the man with the cigar jumped. He looked closer, peering at John's armour before jumping again. The SPARTAN-IVs, while more controlled, shifted nervously before the man spoke. "A SPARTAN-II." He seemed to be in shock. "A real, live SPARTAN-II."

The SPARTAN-IV in silver and cobalt spoke. "Sierra-117, no less. This is the Master Chief." Her voice-for it was clearly the voice of a woman-was tremulous, yet strangely familiar. She seemed afraid-or nervous-for some reason. She took a precipitous breath to steady herself. "I . . . I met him once."

The man with the cigar interrupted. "The Master Chief," he breathed

with a low voice before John corrected him, gently.

"I'm retired. I don't have a rank anymore."

At that, the man straightened and properly introduced himself. "Hello. I am Lieutenant Cassidy." John quickly snapped a salute, even if he wasn't a part of the navy any longer. "I need you to assist in the defence of UNSC research base Kepler. Take Fireteam Undine with you." The lieutenant nodded crisply and pointed at the two SPARTAN-IVs before saluting quickly, at which point protocol dictated that John could drop his own salute. "Good hunting, and, dare I say it, good luck."

John opened his mouth, about to inform the lieutenant that SPARTANS made their own luck when the SPARTAN in lilac and ice blue beat him to it with a deep, yet still effeminate voice. "There was only ever one lucky SPARTAN, and he's here with us now. We'll be fine." The pair of IVs swept through the door, John and the Sentinels trailing behind.

The SPARTAN in silver and blue said, "Maybe introductions are necessary. I know that IIs don't have last names, but do you have a first name? I can't call you Master Chief, and I won't call you Sierra-117. You've already been stripped of enough humanity. I shan't remove more."

John felt a strange affection for this person he didn't know. She refused to remove his humanity just when he was searching most for it. Perhaps the name would help him, even if he'd told no one but other SPARTANS. Although, she too was a SPARTAN, even if not his companion since the age of six. "John."

The one in lilac and ice addressed both SPARTANS at once: "I'm ZÃ¶ Dearbourne. Transferred from the Marine Corps along with with SPARTANS Vandenmeer, Tzao, and Lavine. Say 'Hi', Lavine."

"Hi Lavine." Again, the eerie, haunting memory of a voice John had once known. And the name. But Lavine was't that uncommon of a last name. "By the way, where are Vandenmeer and Tzao?"

Dearbourne raised a hand whimsically, no small feat while jogging with an assault rifle. "Just because we all met at Voi and then again as members of Undine, that doesn't mean I know where they are at all times. You have your tacpad with you, so why don't you check, tell them to get their arses in gear and meet us to kill things?"

Lavine shifted her own gun to her right hand and moved her wrist up, displaying a forearm mounted tacpad, which she proceeded to yell into after checking something. "Oi! Oliver and Ethan, suit up. We're under attack. Sensors suggest that heaviest enemy armour is here." Lavine pressed something on the pad and a blue navigational diamond appeared on John's HUD.

A tinny voice complained, "Why do we have to go to highest enemy concentrations? We may be SPARTANS, but we're also new. Undine was formed what . . . three months ago? We're not rated to do that kind of mission."

"Because we have \_John\_." John would bet that Lavine was smirking under her helmet, but as a SPARTAN-II, John failed to understand some



subtleties of humanity, so he wasn't sure.

"Who?"

In response, Lavine raised her arm up above her head, giving John a clear view of the video chat with Oliver or Ethan, whose last names were probably Vandenmeer and Tzao. John couldn't be sure, though. The Caucasian male had eyes as brown as a pile of guano from the Keeseen bats in the caves on Zena Nadine and hair to match. "Oh," was all he said before terminating contact with a small \_beep.\_

The video function turned off, leaving only the tacpad's background. It was an image of himself at six years of age with a tiny raven-haired girl on the beach at Lake Gusev. It was the second time he'd seen that picture after his induction into the SPARTAN program. Even as Lavine lowered her arm, John gave an audible gasp. Little puzzles had just fallen neatly into place in such a way that would make Cortana giddy. John merely gasped.

Both SPARTAN-IVs spun around, clearly surprised that John had broken his stoic silence. Lavine asked, "Figured out who I am, have you?" John nodded.

He could have left it there; passed her by without another word, just as he'd done last time. But . . . he owed it to her. After all, the secret was out-the SPARTAN-II program had been laid bare to be judged by the survivors who owed their lives to the SPARTANs. And by history. Besides, she was another crucible, a place to burn away some of the impurities on his tarnished soul.

John spoke. "You're Parisa."

Parisa's voice was cold. "How the fuck do you know my name? I never told you. Of that, I am sure."

John was about to reply when movement caught his eye. He, Dearbourne, and Parisa had stopped just short of the doors. Something slammed against them with enough force to dent a sizable portion. An audible \_thud \_rang through the hall, and Dearbourne and Parisa spun back around, assault rifles ready to fire. Another \_thud \_sent the door flying off of its track, letting in a flood of, well, Flood. "We'll finish this discussion later." A sharp nod from Parisa.

John arced a grenade over the heads of the first few Flood; it landed solidly in the middle of the mass. Without a Gravemind to direct them, the Flood didn't understand the danger of the fragmentation grenade; they simply milled around it. The grenade exploded, sending chunks of rotten flesh and spare parts around the room, but it was useless; more Flood poured in, refilling the ranks. John pulled out his assault rifle and fired, his bullets flying with Parisa and Dearbourne's; tearing through flesh as though it were paper. The Sentinels opened fire as well, beams of light lancing through the Flood and burning indiscriminately.

The Flood were timeless, and John lost all track of time when he fought them. It could have been for days, it could have been for minutes before it happened. One of the Brute Flood leapt and struck a Sentinel, sending it careening into another. Both exploded, leaving behind nothing but their carcasses and weapons. Five Sentinels remained. John emptied his current magazine before sprinting over to

the downed Sentinels. He dropped his assault rifle and scooped up the sentinel beams.

A group of bouncing pods had taken advantage of his momentary lapse and were making a break for him. He burnt right through them before returning fire to the concentrated group, sweeping the sentinel beams back and forth as he walked back to Parisa and Dearbourne.

A few moments later, two whistling rockets trailing smoke flew by, decimating the Flood's attack force. John used the last of his sentinel beams' battery to finish off the stragglers. As he took the doorway, a pair of SPARTANs-one in green armour with red trim; one in red armour with green trim-joined Parisa and Dearbourne. The SPARTAN with the rocket launcher-the one in green with red trim-introduced himself as Oliver Vandenmeer and his partner as Ethan Tzao, the other two members of Fireteam Undine.

There was a motor pool on the other side of the door. A pair of Warthogs, a few Mongooses, and a Scorpion idled nearby, guarded only by a smattering of Flood unable to operate the craft. John calmly brought his sidearm to bear and three shots rang out. The first two hit true, surprising the Flood, and the infection pods popped. Two Flood collapsed, but the rest turned, and, as one, charged recklessly. Parisa hurled a scavenged frag grenade, watching with some satisfaction as body parts went flying. The Sentinels shot, burning through three more. Dearbourne, Vandenmeer, and Tzao took the remaining Flood and fired hot lead, ripping the bodies into useless husks.

John plucked the assault rifle off of one of the Flood corpses before climbing into the tank. He keyed the engine and Dearbourne climbed onto the tank, settling into the gunner's seat. Parisa, meanwhile, had started one of the Warthogs, Vandenmeer on the turret and Tzao sitting shotgun.

John drove the tank out of the motor pool, following Parisa's updates to his HUD. The Flood appeared seemingly out of nowhere, swarming over the tank and attacking Parisa's Warthog. John fired indiscriminately into the crowd, relying on Dearbourne and her turret to keep the masses from getting to the tank itself. Parisa drove the Warthog in tight circles around John's Scorpion even as the hulking tank advanced, wading through enemy lines. The far slower Sentinels were soon left behind; rear guards should more Flood attack the base.

The terrain was grassy-rather like a savannah. Rocky walls towered over the tank and enclosed the area. As Tzao dryly noted, "Whoever decided to put Kepler here was either a genius or an idiot. These rocky bluffs will help keep enemies out, but our mobility is severely limited."

"More shooting, less talking!" Parisa snapped as her Warthog barreled through another Flood form. John complied, firing the tank's cannon into a collection of Carriers. The explosive shell sent the Carriers flying. A moment later, they exploded as one.

Unfortunately, the Warthog was just a little too close to a detonating Carrier. The vehicle flipped. Vandenmeer was knocked off of the turret, momentum carrying him into a group of the Flood. In an expert leap, Parisa followed suit, jumping off of the burning car and

landing next to Vandenmeer. Tzao, who'd been closest to the explosion, was caught underneath the Warthog when it tumbled through the air. Tzao pushed the wreck off of himself and began wading through the Flood to get to the tank. John was too busy firing near the Flood congregated around Parisa and Dearbourne to pay him much attention.

Once Tzao was secure aboard the Scorpion, John sent it rolling toward Vandenmeer and Parisa. Dearbourne laid down suppressing fire as John slammed the tank into the rolling mass of bodies. John felt skin give way to metal as he cleared a path to Parisa and Vandenmeer. Both climbed onto the edges the treads and John pulled out of the Flood. Diagnostics showed that the tank had just taken a heavy beating.

But the damage wasn't what caught John's attention. It was Parisa's sarcastic mutterings of, "My hero. My knight in a shining tank." The angry murmurs took him back to a time when she'd said much the same, but with much more sincerity. The details were fuzzy with age, but John knew he needed to talk with her. Alone, if possible.

John was quickly shaken out of his thoughts by Vandenmeer's exclamation of, "We're here!" He sounded far too happy for someone surrounded by an army of the Flood.

As John climbed out of the tank, which sat next to a small, obviously Forerunner building built in the side of the rocky cliff, he asked, "Where is here?"

Parisa answered, pointing at the door. "This is one of the more interesting things on this Halo. Standard procedure in the case of assault is to get to one of these bunkers. These, Ethan, are why we set up Kepler base here. Weren't you listening to the debriefing three months ago?" Tzao demonstrated extraordinary control of his body and shrugged sheepishly.

Parisa continued. "Anyway, these bunkers will encase the entire valley in a one-way shield. We don't pretend to understand the physics of it, but, once activated, a delicate energy shroud keeps most everything out, even in the tunnels. The shroud doesn't keep us from evacuating, however, so it really is quite the advantage."

Parisa pointed at John and said, "You know Forerunner systems, yes?" John mutely nodded his head. "Good. We'll go in to turn on the energy shroud. Ethan, Zæne, Oliver; guard the tank. I don't want to come back from what should be a simple button-pushing to find that the tank was destroyed by the Flood." Tzao, Dearbourne, and Vandenmeer all winked their greens in assent. A moment later, John winked his. After all, it was only right to defer to chain of command. In this case, John was no more than a civilian consultant. One who happened to be proficient with most any firearm.

John turned and followed Parisa into the structure. The doorway slid open silently, admitting the two SPARTANs into its depths. Cool blue forms made out of hard light ran along the walls, which made constant, minute adjustments as John and Parisa walked. There were no side passages, no curves, no turns, but the path was not straight. John began to suspect that the hall changed itself to its user's wishes; bent its form to the minds of those who used it. Cortana would have a better guess, probably involving Forerunner

understanding of slipspace and how to bend the subtleties of the universe. Either way, the hall would probably be bristling with weaponry if unauthorised life-forms entered the long stretch.

John decided not to broach that subject for her and instead opened his mouth to discuss how he knew her name. "Parisa." She whipped her head around to study him. "You asked how I knew your name. If you wish, I shall answer you."

Her laugh seemed almost derisive. "Oh, yes. Do tell. How did the great Master Chief learn my name? Did you try to file a complaint for improper conduct?"

"No. New Mombasa was not the first time I saw that picture. That childhood friend you told me about, John, he didn't die."

And suddenly, Parisa was angry. "Don't lie to me! I was at his funeral. I saw his body, sickly beyond repair. It . . . it wasn't fair." Parisa's voice cracked, and John knew in that instant that she wasn't a soldier.

\_But\_, he reminded himself, \_that isn't always a bad thing\_.

Parisa let out a dry sob and quietly lamented, "Damn it."

This was new. John didn't know how to help comfort someone. He'd helped his brothers and sisters, hell, he'd helped Parisa. But that had been when he was six. Did you assuage an adult's fears; murmur quiet lies? Did you reassure someone; gently pat a shoulder? Did you simply sit and listen; share in the grief and so take some away?

John didn't know. In the end, he just spoke quietly. "I didn't say anything before because the details of the SPARTAN-II program were classified. Now that they've been released, do you know how the children were abducted?"

"Flash clones took their place, but . . ." Parisa trailed off uncertainly.

John picked up her sentence as they walked down the hall. "But flash clones are notoriously unhealthy and quickly die of diseases that a healthy six-year-old should have left behind during infancy."

"You're saying that my John was a SPARTAN? Surely that must have been confusing during training."

John was quiet, waiting for her realisation. When it didn't come, he gave her a hint. "There was only one John."

A pause. A gasp. John expected something after that. Yelling, hitting, laughing, something. But Parisa showed incredible restraint and composed herself, settling back into her silver and blue armour. "How do I know you speak the truth?"

Suddenly, both John and Parisa bent over, stomachs squeezed and gasping; a dull fire burnt in their bellies. When John looked up, he and Parisa were facing a wall with several hard light panels hovering around. The entrance to the tunnel was only a few metres back. As John stepped up, depressing one of the panels almost instinctively,

he told Parisa, "You don't. When all this is over, I'll prove it to you."

A soft sigh ghosted through the hall in response to John's touch. And then a massive boom echoed through the hall. John turned to run, Parisa on his heels. He sprinted toward the door, but it didn't get any closer. Looking back, he could see that the panel had been left far behind. Parisa noticed as well. Her confused, "What?" met with no response. John couldn't talk. He was trying, but his mouth wouldn't open. It was as though another force, both external and internal, was holding his mouth closed.

And then a voice not his own began blaring from his helmet. It was confused, jerking. The pitch fluctuated, and made his entire world blur blue. "Her husband approaches. She hasn't much time. Listen well." And then two words, so soft he might have imagined them. "My love." It was Cortana's voice, whispered a million times, spoken in a million tones, but, unlike the rest of the message, the tone did not change. It was endearing and angry and cheerful and sad and quiet. So, so, quiet. Quiet enough that it had probably only been words in his head.

The cool blue hard light began to quicken. It pulsed, racing faster and faster and fire seared words into John's mind. The Librarian's voice was quiet, with the essence of an echo flying through the infinitely long hallway over and over. "Come. Come to me. I await you at the end of times."

John's head was on fire. Words echoed through his ears, but they faded as a half-remembered dream. So too did the coordinates in his head. John knew the place was in his memory, but that memory could not be called forth. Suddenly, he and Parisa burst through the doorway. A translucent shroud with a thousand facets sparkled overhead, flitting quickly between colours. First white and then purple and then soft, rosy pink.

But that wasn't what caught John's eye. The tank was a burning wreck. Dearbourne, in her light purple and blue armour, lay gasping next to the tank. Parisa rushed over to her friend, but John could see that it was too late. A large gash ran along her stomach, cutting cleanly through her armour. Although cauterised, John could tell that the wound was deep, the result of an energy sword or similar.

Dearbourne gasped, eyes unseeing as her helmet rotated around, seeking something. She was mumbling. "Robots. Robots came. Robots came and stole Ethan. Robots came and stole Oliver."

Parisa touched a hand to Dearbourne's shoulder as a gesture of comfort and said, "Shhh. Rest, Zæe. You've earned it."

Apparently, that wasn't the right thing to say. Dearbourne's hands shot up, wrapping around Parisa's with surprising strength for someone who was busy dying. "Save them." Dearbourne turned her head until it appeared she was looking at Parisa. And then with more force: "Save them!"

A moment later, the hands relaxed and slid off sloppily. Parisa picked them up and, after a moment of manoeuvring, placed them gently over Dearbourne's chest. And thus passed Zæe Dearbourne-Demon in her own right-into the hands of those who watch, staring into the eyes of

eternity.

The shadows of the grass lengthened, and the rocks became a darker brown. The place would be marked, for the universe knows when a great warrior transcends space and time, life and death. Even after John blew the ring to hell, the atoms would be marked. Enemies treading there, beware! Even after death, a Demon may still take revenge. The shield-maidens of Odin, the ravens of Pluto, the angel of Death. Only by blood may they be sated, for they are prophets all. And they have foreseen the wrath of the warrior.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Outbreak<p>

John was ready, but nothing attacked. The plains were quiet as he followed Parisa aimlessly. When he asked where she was going, all she said was, "Patrolling. We guard the sector until the civilians are aboard escape craft and then we head back to our own evac vehicles." But there was nothing to fight. John and Parisa came across piles of Flood material that had once been entire squadrons of Flood. All were on the floor, dead. John collected extra ammunition, but Parisa refused to pry ordnance from the hands of the Flood.

John and Parisa walked on until they came to another pile of dead Flood. Well, mostly dead. One was faking. Suddenly, it jumped up, firing an assault rifle wildly. John cut it down with far more effective short, controlled bursts of his own MA6.

As the Flood fell, a Promethean Knight warped in. John suddenly understood the piles of dead Flood. He shot with his assault rifle, trying desperately to shred the Knight's shields before it had a chance to attack. The Knight roared, firing its suppressor at John. Hard light drained his shields, but when Parisa turned her own gun to the Promethean, its shields broke. Bullets quickly peppered the metal, slicing through wire and matrix.

The Knight Lancer ceased to function, dissolving into hard light rose petals. They scattered across space, melting and winking out. As John crossed over to grab the auto-turret the Knight had dropped, Parisa asked, "What was that?"

John picked up the auto-turret and grunted. Without Cortana to mess with the system and supply it extra energy from his suit, the equipment would only work once. "That was a Promethean Knight. They're combat A.I. serving the Didact and are accompanied by packs of dog-like Crawlers and flying assistants called Watchers. What they're doing on this ring, though . . . that worries me."

Parisa reloaded her assault rifle before responding. "You said they're A.I. As in robots?"

"I guess."

"Dearbourne mentioned robots. Could Prometheans have taken Vandenmeer and Tzao?"

"I suppose. I don't know why they wouldn't just kill them, though. Besides, how would we track them?"

"Leave that to me. The tacpad is a neat toy. I just need a sample of a Promethean's energy output. We need to find a Knight."

A deep hum grew from nothing and crescendoed. A pair of slipspace portals emerged from the centre of the hum. Two Knights warped in and, noticing the situation, bent legs and leapt sideways, away from John's muzzle. He dryly noted, "Or, one could find us." John threw the auto-turret into the air and sprinted away just in time to dodge a spray of hard light. One of the Knights stepped forward, challenging John and Parisa.

The auto-turret opened up, placing a perfect spread on the Knight. John squeezed the trigger of his pistol and felt the comfortable buck as a slug flew toward the Knight. John stepped forward, placing bullets right over the Knight's head. Parisa tapped her tacpad a few times before leveling her own gun at the Knight. She swept forward, shooting at the Knight's back.

But she was unsure of a Knight's capabilities. It turned far more swiftly than a SPARTAN could and teleported up to Parisa, swinging its blade arm. She stumbled back wildly, just out of the Knight's reach. It took a step forward and she took one back as it fired a suppressor point blank. Parisa's shields were drained in a brief moment.

Seeing no other, choice, John hurled himself forward, running and jumping onto the Knight's back. It stung as he crashed into the hulking monstrosity. John clutched it, one hand wrapping around the head. The Knight swung around wildly, trying to throw John off. He gritted his teeth and let go with one arm. John grasped his combat knife and thrust it into the Knight's neck. The Knight froze and John leapt gracefully off before it dissolved into hard light flakes.

"Sorry about that," Parisa said, "I didn't know how fast they were. On the bright side, I got the location of the most energy signatures." She tapped her tacpad, and a blue diamond objective appeared on John's HUD. So did the other Knight. It raised what John recognised as a scattershot and fired.

John's shields collapsed, and so did he. John reached for his assault rifle and scrambled to his feet, trying to deter the Knight with a wall of hot lead. The Knight Commander dashed aside, sights turned on Parisa. She tucked, hit the ground, and rolled left before popping up with her assault rifle spewing death. The two combined fire. Without cover, the Knight withered and fell, leaving behind a Promethean Vision unit. John tossed it to Parisa, who integrated it into her own upgraded armour without the use of an A.I. He also gave her his spare assault rifle mags, opting instead for the fallen Commander's scattershot.

An ominous humming made the pair whirl around. A Watcher hovered calmly, blue data stream collecting the essence of the other Knight. John switched to his Magnum and got off a trio of shots before the light ceased and another Knight Lancer spawned in. Trusting Parisa to entertain it for a moment, John emptied his magnum into the Watcher, reloaded and kept firing. The Watcher was quick, but fairly fragile. A few more bullets shattered the little devil.

John looked over to see Parisa running to the side, firing her

assault rifle at the Knight. It shot suppressor bolts right back. John sprinted forward, blasting the already hurt Knight with his scattershot. It froze up and dissolved.

John loaded another shell into his scattershot. Parisa oriented herself toward the Knights' hub and said, "Race you." She sprinted off and John followed suit.

The Prometheans that stood in their way fell quickly, and Parisa got her first taste of Crawlers at the fourth skirmish. A horde leapt from a large rock and quickly surrounded the pair, corralling and biting, but never with enough coordination to harm the super soldiers more than superficially. John shouted, "Headshots!" and demonstrated with his pistol. The Crawlers fell away and John swapped his nearly empty magnum for a boltshot.

The pair pressed on through a small army of Prometheans and the occasional duel with the Flood. John and Parisa once came upon Flood and Prometheans duking it out. A few Flood carried rocket launchers. A Knight Battlewagon with an incineration cannon provided a deadly counterpart. John and Parisa decided to sneak around. Way around.

Three short battles later, John and Parisa found themselves near Parisa's waypoint. It was a medium sized building with clearly Forerunner architecture. If it was a hostage situation like Parisa had suggested, overwhelming force would be bad. But John's radar also showed red dots galore. In the end, John just took a SAW from a UNSC ammo crate stationed near the door. Parisa would hang back, sniping with a sniper rifle.

The door to the antechamber slid open with an audible whoosh and eighteen Prometheans turned to fight. John started with the Watchers, mowing down all three. Then he focused on the Crawlers, mostly relying on punches to save precious ammunition. John heard a pair of crack\_s and saw a Knight with a pair of bullet holes in it dissolve. John winked his green as a thank you before peppering the other two Knights with high-velocity rounds. Really, when John had superior firepower, not even Knights were a challenge.

To get a better scope of what was happening inside with alerting any enemies by using Promethean Vision, John activated the invisibility module he'd picked up from a fallen Flooded Brute and snuck into the main outpost. There was an upper balcony and stairs were to his immediate right. Creeping out into the open, but sticking to the shadows, John saw several Watchers hovering above a collection of prisoners. A Knight stalked among them and Crawlers paced in a loose circle around the kneeling men and women. John saw Vandenmeer's telltale green and red armour, but Tzao's red and green wasn't among the prisoners.

He looked around a moment longer and saw the Mark IV GEN-2 lying in the shadows with a pile of other bodies; broken, bloodied, cold, the bodies were certainly dead. John had suspected as much.

Near the bodies, a hard light control interface was built into the wall. Another Knight stood at the panel.

John's camouflage module was going to fail in just a moment, but he wanted a peek at the upper walkway first. He stepped cautiously up



the stairs until his helmet peeked out. Four Knights walked the room, probably in rotation. A Watcher drifted nearby each and a clutch of Crawlers swarmed around each Knight's feet. John didn't have time to see any more.

Once back in the antechamber, John gave the details to Parisa. "Two levels. Prisoners on bottom, dead bodies in corner. Vandenmeer made it. Tzao didn't. Knight guards, Crawlers and Watchers wait nearby. Four patrols on upper balcony. A Knight, a Watcher, some Crawlers in each patrol."

Parisa nodded and swallowed. "You run interference. Distract the ground so that I can get to the balcony and take care of the upper level."

John nodded and advanced toward the main door. It slid open and he ran inside, howling like a banshee. The Crawlers broke formation to attack him, as did the Watchers stationed overhead. The Knight at the workstation pulled out a binary rifle, so John started weaving back and forth while firing into the crowd, aiming to kill but sweeping the gun back and forth rather than concentrating fire like his every instinct screamed for him to do. But John knew the plan. He had to keep the entire group entertained until the first shot.

John fired a few shots at the Knight patrolling within the mass of prisoners, but it was smart enough to stay in the crowd, use bodies as cover. And that was bad news for John; the humans didn't prevent the Knight from shooting at him, and his shields were depleting quickly.

At last, John heard the telltale \_crack\_s of three hollow-point sniper bullets breaking the sound barrier. The Knight with the binary rifle froze, two holes and three bullets in its head. Linda would have been proud.

John ducked behind one of the elegant pillars, shooting concentrated fire at any Crawlers brave enough to venture around the corner. Once his energy shields had recharged, John turned the corner and mowed down the Crawlers and Watchers properly, concentrating fire until the Promethean was dead.

More sniper shots. The Knight on the ground floor had adopted a praying pose; it was preparing to teleport. A thought flashed through John's mind. Parisa didn't have enough experience to deal with an enemy teleporting behind her. John barreled through the last of the ground floor enemies, kicking a Crawler so hard that it broke. He bellowed, "Out of the way!" and ran through the prisoners, who were already up and trying to escape. But John was too far away. The Knight disappeared in a light purple flash.

So did Vandenmeer. In that last instant, he'd grabbed the Knight. John stopped and turned around, heading up the stairs. He reached the balcony in time to see Parisa put a bullet through a Watcher trying to revive a fallen Knight. Vandenmeer was busy trying to rip the head off of his Knight. John crossed over and helped him by grabbing the Knight's blade arm and forcing it around, grinding the servomechanisms. John swung the arm, decapitating the Knight as Vandenmeer dodged away.

Parisa sighed and handed a stray suppressor to Vandenmeer. "What

happened?"

"We-that is, Tzao, Dearboune, and I-were attacked by these things. The big ones."

"Promethean Knights." John tried to keep his voice steady and even because he could see Vandenmeer starting to break. Some people just didn't have the mentality to be SPARTANs, augmentations or not.

"Right. They teleported next to us somehow. Five of them. ZÃ¶e was quick. She grabbed one on the lightsaber arm and shoved a grenade into a chink before running away. It blew, but we were unprepared. Ethan and I were grabbed and teleported here. Ethan and I were stripped of our weapons and made to kneel with everyone else. We were told to wait by a Promethean with an awful, grinding, mechanical voice. Apparently, a Didact was going to interrogate us prisoners. I don't know what a Didact is, but if they can command these Prometheans, I don't want to meet one."

"The Didact. There's only one. He is a Forerunner intent on destroying humanity. He activated the Halos 100,000 years ago. He should have been killed by the firing, so I don't know how he survived. I also don't know how he survived when I killed him about a fortnight ago," John explained.

"Well, Ethan didn't want to be interrogated. He stood up and ran and grabbed one of the small dogs. He ripped its head off and ran to the door. Then one of the flying ones shot a blue beam at him, locking in some kind of field. A Knight walked up and reached through the field with one hand. It . . . it snapped. It snapped with one hand." Vandenmeer's voice was growing hysterical by the end.

"What snapped with one hand?" John had a sneaking suspicion, but Parisa kept her voice calm and nonconfrontational.

"The neck. His neck. What else? They snapped his neck like a dry twig!" Vandenmeer took a deep breath. "Did anyone else make it?"

John lied. It was clear that Dearbourne's death would send him over the edge. And SPARTANs had to keep calm. A panicking SPARTAN could seriously hurt allies by accident. "Yes. ZÃ¶e was injured, so we sent her to an evacuation transport. Maybe you'll find her."

"Oh. Oh good." Vandenmeer seemed so relieved. Parisa gave John a small nod. He'd said the right thing, then.

Parisa cleared her throat. "Come on. We have people that need to get back to the transports. They can't just teleport like the Knights can."

John eyed the hard light control panel on the lower level. "Or maybe we can." He amplified his voice, speaking to the whole room. "Is anyone good with Forerunner systems?" John leapt off of the balcony and crossed over to the control panel. "If you are, come over here and help me figure out the teleportation grid."

A short technician in a grey lab coat walked up. "I think I can. Give me a minute. Send us to the coordinates for the evac shuttles?"

John nodded his assent and called out, "This may induce some nausea." John waited for golden rings to pick him up and deposit him elsewhere. Nothing happened.

John waited for about fifteen seconds before the first person winked out of existence. Five seconds later, rings picked up everyone else.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Outbreak<p>

Golden light deposited John next to a transport with an open door. And then he fell on his face.

The technician fared far worse. He stood up, threw up, and asked, "Where'd I screw up? Why didn't we land feet first?" John just shrugged.

The technician stumbled off to join the other former prisoners in a line to get on the escape shuttle. John walked up to the door, but didn't step in. He just looked into the dark interior. Lieutenant Cassidy peered back. "Thanks for rescuing these people, Chief. That's most everybody, and we can't wait around any longer. Climb aboard." Cassidy offered his hand as though he could pull the SPARTAN-complete in MJOLNIR armour-aboard.

John graciously denied the offer. "No thanks. I think Lavine and Vandenmeer would like to come aboard, however." John gestured to the two SPARTANS right behind him. "Just leave something with a slipspace drive for me. I need to blow this Halo before the Flood escape."

Cassidy nodded and pulled out a data pad. He scrolled down and tapped something. "It'll be there," Cassidy promised. John nodded his thanks and stepped aside to let Vandenmeer and Parisa inside.

Vandenmeer climbed up and made his way into the darker interior. Parisa, however, stopped and looked at John. "I lost you once. I won't lose you again. You have some unfulfilled promises."

John suddenly felt his stomach tie up in knots. He'd promised to save Cortana. He'd failed, so he was making it up to her. But he'd also failed to carry through with several promises to Parisa. In the end he settled for, "You know me. I never make a girl a promise I can't keep."

"You won't lose me. I just have to blow up a Forerunner super weapon. I'm probably the only planet-sized superstructure demolitions expert in the galaxy. After that, I'll find you."

Parisa nodded as though a sacred oath had just been made. She climbed aboard the evacuation vehicle along with the last of the civilian experts that she and John had rescued. John turned and walked away as the ship lifted off.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: As computer constructs, Prometheans spawn and

respawn. And yes, I know John's explanation is faulty. But he doesn't know that. Also, the antechamber is soundproofed, but not weird-red-burst-from-using-Promethean-Vison-proof. \*\*

\*\*Also, gameplay would have a video until the Flood attack, another video in the Forerunner hallway and Dearbourne's death, and an end video once the technician teleported everyone.\*\*

\*\*As always, please help me correct any logical fallacies, grammatical errors and (speling) mistakes. Thanks for reading.\*\*

## 6. Sarge: The Movie

\*\*A/N: Hello, and sorry that this isn't a chapter of Halo: 5. I'm just . . . distraught. A friend of mine relapsed, took some old pain medication because she found out that her dog has cancer, and she's looking for a job to pay for school, and she just needed away, even if it was depressants that took her there.\*\*

\*\*My trust has been shaken, and I don't think writing the (hopefully) deeper, more internal, story of Halo: 5 is a good idea right now. So I'm thinking about making Roosterteeth's Sarge: The Movie that they suggested in their Blockbuster PSA. It'll likely be rated M for maroon (this is Roosterteeth), and I plan on doing it in script format. Anyone who wants to help me direct this movie would be appreciated.\*\*

\*\*So that this isn't just an A/N, here's the opening scene, if you're interested. I'm not sure when the next chapter (of Sarge: The Movie or of Halo: 5) will be out, so please be patient.\*\*

\*\*Disclaimer: I am in no way affiliated with Roosterteeth, 343 Industries, Bungie, or Microsoft. This is for my enjoyment, and (hopefully) the enjoyment of others. I do not recive a profit.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><em>Scene opens looking up in grassy pasture next to the ruins of red base<em>.)

Washington: Any last words, red? (\_Red is derogatory\_)

(\_Scene pans down to reveal Sarge kneeling, hands placed on back of head. Washington stands a metre away, shotgun pointed at Sarge\_.)

Sarge: Just six. Go to hell.

Washington: A shame, red. I expected more from the great Sarge.  
(\_pumps\_ \_shotgun\_)

(\_Scene fades to black\_)

Sarge (voiceover): War will make martyrs of us all.

(\_long pause\_)

Sarge (voiceover): I can't respect their ideals, but I can respect

their willingness to die for those ideals. The willingness of one in particular. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Sarge (voiceover): I'll start at the beginning. (\_Title [Sarge] fades in as Sarge\_ \_continues speaking\_) My name is Sarge. I was born in deep Texas. ironic, really.

Sarge (voiceover): I don't know why my parents named me Sarge. I guess they must have always wanted me to be in the military.

(\_hammering and machinery sounds\_)

(\_Title becomes words on metal dog tag on conveyer belt. Machine descends and etches serial number [620-750].\_)

Sarge (voiceover): I guess they knew war was on the horizon.

(\_Scene shifts to children, all in shirts of various shades of red, standing in lines for an admissions office.\_)

Sarge (voiceover): I signed up, went to the esteemed Milwaukee Sergeant School with all the rest. I graduated with full marks and attended the College of Military Strategy and History in Memphis.

(\_Scene shifts to lecture hall. Children, all in red, listen as a professor speaks [silently] and draws battle diagrams on the board.\_)

Sarge (voiceover): I learned about great battles, from the holding of the Hot Gates in Greece to the defence of the Alamo right in my home town to the victory at Hippolyta's Girdle in the Orion cluster.

(\_Scene shifts to children in red battle fatigues running obstacle courses and sparring with one another.\_)

Sarge (voiceover): I trained hard and fought harder. I was top of the class, a prodigy despite my short stature.

(\_Scene shifts to a graduation ceremony. Everyone wears red, and a group of reddish coloured soldiers in full MJOLNIR Mark IV armour stand in line. A single bright red soldier stands at the front.\_)

Sarge (voiceover): I graduated top of the class and got my dog tags.

(\_Bright red soldier walks up to podium, shakes hand of professor. Camera zooms in on hand, specifically dog tag [Sarge 620-750] dropped face-up in palm.\_)

Sarge (voiceover): At last, I was a true soldier, ready to combat the worst threat since antiquity.

(\_Scene fades to black, dog tag fades to white title [Sarge].\_)

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: How was the intro? Should I drop the script format?  
Drop the story?\*

\*\*If you want to be director, screenplayer, costume designer, writer, whatever, just PM or review saying that you want to help.\*\*

## 7. One Last Time

\*\*A/N: And I'm back. Raise your hand if you missed me. Blow a raspberry if you didn't. \*\*

\*\*But I'm feeling better. My friend doesn't need to go to rehab, and her social worker is confident that everything will get better. Special thanks to 1 for letting me know that I'm not alone. I knew I wasn't, but it still helps to hear (read) it from an outside source.\*\*

\*\*In other news, I didn't get anyone wanting to help with Sarge: The Movie, and I can't (won't) make a whole movie (or just the script) alone. So feel free to adopt my script. If you want to use my words exactly, just cite me, please.\*\*

\*\*Disclaimer: I am in no way affiliated with Microsoft, Bungie, or 343 Industries. This is for my enjoyment and, hopefully, the enjoyment of others. I do not receive a profit.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>One Last Time<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Outbreak<p>

John walked away from the escape ship, careful not to look back. He only had two goals: find a nuclear grade explosive and get back to research base Kepler and onto the last transport. To get nuclear grade weaponry, John would have to find a bomb; without Cortana, he couldn't turn the base's fusion reactors into explosives.

Hefting his assault rifle, John broadcast on all frequencies, "Attention 049-Abject Testament. I need high-explosive ordnance to counter the Flood threat. Where can I find some?"

John only had a moment to wait before he got his answer. The monitor floated down from above, babbling. "Of course, Reclaimer. However, in case of rampancy, all weaponry on this ring aside from the Sentinels is inaccessible to me. Furthermore, compartmentalisation requires that I know nothing about the locations of such devices, other than that they are on this ring."

John groaned. "A Cartographer?"

Testament floated up giddily. "Of course, Reclaimer. Be warned, I am detecting numerous Flood biosigns around that area."

"Where aren't there Flood biosigns?"

Abject Testament took the question at face value and answered, "At

the moment? Docking station three, the Zephyr Locale, and munitions depot seven. However, the Records Office, signal beacon twelve, the Gaia Imperative, and several others all have negligible Flood biosignatures. Even a class three combat skin such as yours would be enough to visit those areas."

John ignored the ramblings and said, "Take me to the Cartographer. I need the location of these nukes."

"Technically, they are not nuclear devices. Indeed, they utilise a quark-gluon explosive to detonate. This explosion will then make use of the colour force, fundamentally more powerful than your primitive nuclear weaponry. As the quarks destabilise, they will attempt to realign themselves as mesons, since those are the connection of only two quarks, as opposed to hadrons, which require more gluons.

"This shift in fundamental spin renders Fermi-Dirac statistics useless, instead replaced by Bose-Einstein statistics, causing-"

"Yes," interrupted John, "I get it. Stuff goes boom."

Abject Testament jerked back as though offended. "There is no boom, as you put it. Everything simply changes from hadrons into mesons, rendering it-"

John sighed. "Just get me to the Cartographer, and send me some help while you're at it." Abject Testament nodded and his orange eye flashed the colour of the sun for just a moment.

And then John was surrounded by golden rings.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Outbreak<p>

John landed with a slight thud, assault rifle already up and pointing. But nothing jumped him. So John took a few moments to survey his surroundings.

This Cartographer appeared to be on a mountain, or, as was more likely, in it. Snow buffeted the peak, reducing visibility. Sparse pines grew in the snow with little promise of cover. The mountain rose to John's left; a sharp plummet was only a few metres from his right. Meanwhile, John stood on a beaten, fairly level path. Behind him, a massive rockslide blocked passage back around. John couldn't see any Forerunner architecture unless he looked up at the awesome majesty of the entire ringworld.

John walked cautiously along the slope, following the NAV point Abject Testament had downloaded into his helmet. John was looking for an entrance to the Cartographer.

His suit adjusted itself, but John still felt the stinging cold through it, felt as the temperature increased his lethargy and sapped his energy.

Sadly, the Flood seemed unaffected by the cold. A combat form leapt from above, slamming into John and knocking him closer to the cliff. John collapsed, pushing the Flood form away as he fell. The combined

momentum was too much and the beast went sailing over the cliff. John rose gingerly to his feet, checking to see if more Flood showed up.

When none did, John pressed on, hunting for clues.

And then came the tide.

They were too coordinated to be attacking on their own; a Proto-Gravemind must have been directing the assault. However, without any pure forms to augment their forces, it was clear that Graveminds couldn't form that quickly. Without those pure forms, the Flood had no means to repel any SPARTAN super soldier, much less John-117.

John marched on, wrapping around the mountain. The scenery was much the same; snowy winds buffeted trees, which offered no real protection, and the mountainous cliff still dropped away into a breathtaking valley with sprawling greenery dotting a series of snowy hills and smaller mountains.

Suddenly, something went \_thump\_ behind John. He whirled around to see a pair of combat forms land after dropping from the trees above. Five more leapt down. John was about to open fire again when a shuffling from behind drew his attention. Three carriers flanked by four combat forms advanced around the ridge. One had an energy sword active and another carried a rocket launcher.

John twisted, jumping over the rocket he could tell was streaking at his feet. Holding the trigger on the assault rifle down, John fired as much lead as he could into the Flood, which proceeded to scatter. Puffs of ice went up as the bullets slammed into nothing but snow.

John changed tactics, throwing a frag at one of the carriers. With its short legs, the little blighter couldn't hope to survive as the grenade detonated, sending it flying.

The sudden confusion must have startled the Proto-Gravemind; the Flood reverted to baser habits, losing all cohesion but keeping their weapons. John charged, mowing down the Flood until his assault rifle clicked empty. Dodging a few plasma bolts, he slammed a new magazine into the rifle before opening up again. It was a massacre, but John's assault rifle had only a half-clip left. Bending down, he swapped it for a pair of spikers before pressing on.

John stepped around the ridge to find what he was looking for. Flood sentries marched sloppily back and forth across a metallic, Forerunner door. John supposed they were guarding the Cartographer even if they didn't seem able to get in. The door had a few dents, but it stood locked against the Flood. After all, they weren't human any more.

John gripped his spikers and ran out firing. Superheated metal spikes quickly buried themselves in the squishy bodies, just as they had buried themselves in Miranda Keyes. John winced microscopically at that analogy.

\_If only I'd been faster.\_



But it was no use dwelling on past memories and thoughts. John's weapons clicked empty and the surviving Flood were quick to respond with their own hail of mixed death. Plasma, bullets, spikes, even an explosive fired from a brute shot. Rather than waste precious time reloading, John just threw his spikers, bayonets pointed, impaling a carrier and the combat form with brute shot.

The carrier form exploded, spreading pandemonium, and John took the opportunity to dash close enough to grab the brute shot. The bladed weapon would be perfect for hacking off the limbs of the remaining Flood forms. Augmentations aside, the weapon could dismember anyone. John had seen it happen to marines captured by Brutes. John merely replicated the feat, nearly flying as he leapt around, tearing through Flood with the knife part of his knife.

Eight swift executions later, John stood triumphant. Wiping Flood matter off of his armour, he attached the brute shot to the mag clip on his back. John walked cautiously toward the door, wary of tricks by the Proto-Gravemind. But there was nothing. John was alone with his thoughts and his misery. Never again would he hear Sergeant Johnson crack a joke or watch Miranda pilot a ship like a madwoman.

Never again would John hear Cortana's comforting, sarcastic voice or feel the liquid mercury that was her seeping through his memories like quicksilver. The pain had been sharp at first, freezing cold and so, so penetrating. And then it had faded into a dull chill. Next, a cool, refreshing aura. He loved that feeling, the change from acute sensation to calm relaxation. But it was gone, dead with her.

John had never had another A.I. in his head, but it wouldn't be the same. Besides, he'd promised her. There would never be another for him.

Which was why he was here in front of a Cartographer rather than mourning lost friends back on Earth. Shaking off such depressing thoughts, John keyed the open button and watched as the door slid open. He stepped through, pistol at the ready.

But nothing attacked. Nothing sounded except John's quiet footsteps, reverberating silently around the chamber.

It was a place apart from the ravages of time, and John did his best not to disturb the settled dust as he made his way down to the computer console several levels down. The cautious motion wasn't just a desire not to stir up curses sleeping in this ancient crypt. It served as a reminder of Cortana's silences whenever she encountered an awesome, magnificent, and truly primordial feat of engineering. With bated breath and in weighted solitude, John advanced mutely and without preamble through the empty, long-dead halls.

In only a few minutes, John had made it to the Cartographer. Walking up to it, he pressed a panel. How he knew it was the right panel, John didn't know. But he pressed it anyway, and three not-so-random pushes later, a hologram of the ring with a pair of glowing dots appeared. The dots were almost on top of each other, but John knew that the scale would fool most. The second dot, the explosive, was at least a kilometre away. John uploaded the data to his HUD and almost groaned; walking that would be incredibly tedious, and 049-Abject Testament was nowhere to be seen.

At least, until he floated down from above. "Hello again, Reclaimer. As I am unable to know the exact location of any high-yield explosives such as the Aquila bombs you seek, I have brought an M12 LRV LAAG variant with me. Please proceed outside. We must find these Aquila bombs so that you can contain the infestation.

"I shall part with you outside, because I am unable to-" Abject Testament twitched. His voice stopped a moment, fluctuated at the speed of memory, doing a total recall of every language he knew. And then it started again. Same voice, same tone, same everything. But with a cold undertone. "I am 049-Abject Testament. Authorisation code approved. New orders received.

"Human, you have trespassed. Prepare your soul and die well." And then Abject Testament fired, roiling death pouring off of his "eye".

John leapt to the side, grasping for a weapon. He came up only with the brute shot from before and his pistol. If Abject Testament was anything like Guilty Spark, John would need the kind of firepower he didn't have. So he rolled, slipping his bulky form beneath the closing door.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Outbreak<p>

John popped up with his brute shot pointing. A pair of Knights stood in his way. John fired the clip in his brute shot, the explosive impacting the shields and then quickly breaking through them. John reloaded his brute shot and advanced forward.

John went only a few feet before a swarm of Crawlers forced him to reevaluate his position. Jumping back, John pulled out his Magnum and lined up a Crawler and the iron sights. John's finger moved elegantly, depressing the trigger just enough to send a non-ferrous metallic slug into the head of the lead Crawler. The little beast broke, hard light joints dissolving.

John emptied the rest of his pistol into the group, slamming the last survivor with his empty gun. He reloaded the Magnum, swapped to his brute shot, and sprinted toward the ramp up to the next level.

John saw the signs of a Knight teleporting in, so he changed his path, dashing right up to the Knight. As the Knight solidified, John flipped the brute shot around and impaled the Knight on his knife. The Knight popped, scattering itself as a series of hard light flakes; brilliant rose petals drifting gently in the wind. John took only a moment to swap his pistol for the Knight's incineration cannon.

John scampered up the ramp and discovered why Knights kept teleporting in. There was a massive battle between the Flood and a small army of Prometheans. Knights jumped around, matching the agility of combat forms. Crawlers nipped at heels and chased infection forms. Watchers terrorised carrier forms.

John had neither the time nor inclination to fight a battle that size if the halo was going to be blown up anyway. He fired a shot of the

incineration cannon into the crowd, hoping to disperse some combatants. John then continued forward, using his brute shot to keep the path to the door clear.

John almost made it, too. The door to the windy outside on the mountain was open, activated by John's proximity when he heard the voice. "To have come so far, and to have failed so spectacularly." The voice was cold and high, haughty of all beneath. John's feet turned of their own accord. The Didact stood, dressed in his second skin. Abject Testament floated near him, no longer bobbing.

The Didact extended a gauntleted hand to the side, causing a binary rifle to float over into it. John dove through the doorway, feeling searing heat as the air where his head had been was vapourised by a beam of hard light. He also felt as his shields popped, straining to hold up against the heat. And then the shields failed and the heat pressed in and the visor warped just a little, on the right edge. But John didn't have time to worry about that as he tried to dodge the rest of the attack as he flew through the air and crashed into the snow.

The sudden temperature differential was not without consequences. Where the temperature had been highest, where the polarised visor had warped, the sudden change released enough energy for a sickening crack. John didn't have the time to worry about the break in his MJOLNIR armour. He got up from the frozen ground of the mountain and threw his equipment without checking to see what it was in a last attempt to buy time. A red radar jammer flew out of his hand. Useless.

John groaned internally as he leapt into the Warthog idling nearby, exactly where Abject Testament had promised it. The Didact may have taken control of Gamma Halo and its monitor, but he couldn't rewind all the help Abject Testament had given before.

John floored the accelerator, and the Warthog went sailing down the mountain. John found himself swerving wildly to avoid trees, rocks and moguls as he careened down the steep slope.

Thirty-four deadly seconds later, John had made it down the mountain. He started to drive toward the objective on his HUD when he heard a loud \$crash\$ behind him. Turning his head and cursing the lack of mirrors, John saw the Didact stand up from the crouch he'd landed in and begin to sprint toward the Warthog. John had no idea how he could take that kind of fall without ill effect, but John also didn't know how anyone could survive what had happened last time: grenade to the face, high fall, and then nuclear detonation.

It didn't matter. John sped away.

\* \* \*

><p>Day Two of Outbreak<p>

John didn't know how long he'd been driving for. Logically, it couldn't have been too long, because he was still a few hundred metres from the explosives. But the Didact had chased him the entire way, shooting his binary rifle on occasion.

It was tedious, speeding through the beautiful ring and watching as

the Flood slowly started to rape the land. In places, John wanted to get out and help rather than allow the Flood to conquer the soon-to-be-destroyed Halo Installation 03, but shots from the Didact's binary rifle soon corrected these urges.

At least John could watch the distance counter tick down from one kilometre to five hundred metres to one hundred metres to fifty metres to none.

John swung out of the Warthog and dashed into the squat Forerunner building, pausing only long enough to shoot the control panel. John knew that, unlike in fiction, high-powered rounds to the lock (like the ones he had) would actually close a door more effectively.

Looking up, John found himself in an armoury. As he walked closer to a stack of explosives labeled in strange glyphs, a cool white voice flowed over John, whispering in his ear. "Hello, child. I have not the time to explain. Meet me here." A burning washed over John, and once again, memories unremembered, never to be forgotten.

"Come. Your ship awaits." Another door, recessed far and away, opened.

A loud banging outside the door. John looked back in time to see a Knight teleport in. It bent down, releasing a Watcher. Three more Knights, one a commander, teleported in.

John grabbed one of the bombs and ran toward the door. Fumbling it in his hands, John tried to activate the device without help. And then the searing in his mind returned.

The pain in John's mind blotted all else out for a moment.

When he came to, he was nearly to the door and the Aquila bomb was pulsing a brilliant cobalt with golden icons flashing. Rather than risk bringing a live bomb aboard the ship, John dropped the device and sprinted through the doors and onto a ship similar to the keyship, from what he'd seen of it en route to Earth.

Dashing to the control room of the Forerunner ship, John let instinct take over. He pushed buttons that felt right until no more buttons felt right. John waited a moment, barely feeling as the ship took off, smoothly lifting out of its hangar.

John watched as the ground lifted away, finally curving upward and linking up to form the entirety of the Halo. A moment of peace in space. A dazzling light. And forever, the silence of nothingness. The delicate ring dissolved in a desperate brilliance.

John entered coordinates into the ship's computer. Once again, instinct and searing pain. And then the infinite darkness of slipspace.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Yes, parallels should be drawn between this level and the level Halo in Halo: 3. As always, please correct any mistakes, and please, do review. Knowing your thoughts, any of them, is a boon unto me.\*\*

**\*\*Gameplay:** Once you get onto the mountain until you enter the room of the computer console. Escaping, including the entire Warthog scene, up until you sprint through the doors to the bomb storage room, with an interactive cutscene during your interaction with the Didact.\*\*

## 8. Zero Point

**\*\*A/N:** I'll be updating more slowly. Deal with it.\*\*

**\*\*Also,** if you like this, please check out **\*\*\*\*\_A\_\*\*\*\*\_Brief History of the Universe\_\*\*\*\*** so that I can hear your comments on a story that could come once I finish this.\*\*

**\*\*Disclaimer:** I am in no way affiliated with Microsoft, Bungie, or 343 Industries. This is for my enjoyment and, hopefully, the enjoyment of others. I do not receive a profit.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Zero Point<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Day Two of Destruction<p>

Slipspace ended suddenly. The Forerunner ship jerked back into realspace without the smoothness it had entered slipspace with.

John crossed over to the formless window, peering at his destination. A rusty red coin glinted among the stars, rotating slowly in place. It faced a large, red sun nearing the end of its life.

As the Forerunner ship closed on the coin, a blue figure spun up on the holo-table behind John with a whirring. John's carefully tuned ears detected the sound and he turned ever so slowly, by degrees. A pale blue woman.

John's throat felt raw as he whispered, "Cortana."

The A.I. didn't respond, so the faintest of whispers, the imperceptible, "I'm here, John," at the edge of his hearing must have been a figment of his imagination.

Hallucinations. Even SPARTANs got tired, John knew. He shook his head to clear it, an echo of Cortana clinging still to the edge of his mind. Indeed, perhaps, the fey strains of the haunting echo of her base code-the very centre of her humanity-trapped in his neural interface.

The blue figure spoke. "No, SPARTAN. I am merely an ancilla representing the interests of the Librarian. That below us is Paradigm, a research station designed to create ancilla like myself. Indeed, one could say I was born here. Please prepare for arrival."

John turned, looking back out the window, and saw that Paradigm, which was suddenly much closer, was not a coin. More a half-sphere.

Beneath the cinnabar top, a metal dome wrapped the bottom. A million nodes of light ran along the metal, and it grew visibly closer as the ship drifted nearer and nearer.

The metal bottom was, in fact, not smooth as most Forerunner structures were, rather a series of metal bars and interlocking shapes that merely gave the appearance of smoothness from afar.

But the ship didn't go to the metal, instead aiming for the top. John's sharp eyes soon caught that the red was from sand; an infinitude of grains raging through whatever atmosphere there was. But an atmosphere certainly. The sand could not ravage the planetary structure in such storms as appeared to rage without wind. And wind was the sole providence of atmosphere.

Really, the sand blowing in the wind was beautiful. But it could also be deadly. And even though space looked empty at the moment, John knew well how quickly space could be filled with hostile ships.

John would need all the shields he could get in that case, and if the sand was strong enough, it could certainly buffet through his shields a bit. And if the shields failed, John didn't want to find out what a particle of sand at incredible speeds could do to MJOLNIR armour. Force equals mass times acceleration. Even if mass was tiny; a gram; get it going fast enough and it would be deadly to an unarmoured human. Some planets had winds in excess of six hundred kilometers per hours, and John had no clue how fast the Forerunners desired their own winds.

So when the Cortana doppelgänger asked if John wanted a Forerunner nano-weave cloak to help him brave Paradigm's environs, John accepted.

A moment of whirring, and then the cloak was released from a secret crack in the ceiling, drifting gently down until John caught it. He wasn't sure how well the cloak would protect him, but Forerunner structure was quite durable.

Slipping his knife out of its sheath, John grabbed the cloak and pulled it around himself, grateful to find that it fit comfortably around his MJOLNIR armour. A small pocket served as a place to hold his knife. A moment of hesitation before John detached the storage pouch from his right leg. Normally used to store ammunition, it would be useless underneath the brown cloak. John couldn't tell how soft it was, but the cloak rippled like a shimmering gauze of water around him. But, just as Cortana had never felt the sunshine on her skin, couldn't know that Requiem's sun was false, John couldn't know that the cloak was soft.

John quickly shunted such thoughts to the back of his mind and opened the storage pouch, letting bullet cases fall out and scatter along the floor until just his dog tags remained. John pulled them out and wrapped them around his forearm, under the cloak, keeping Cortana's broken data matrix between his forearm and engraved dog tags.

Picking up a single bullet case, John looked around his cloak for a place to store extra ammunition. Finding nowhere, John let it fall, slowly. Two seconds and then clang. Two point three metres tall. No initial velocity. Three point five metres per second per second

acceleration. John crossed over to the assault rifle resting against the wall and picked it up before walking to the back of the ship. It would touch down in just a moment and then he would be on foot. John prayed that his assault rifle would have enough bullets.

\* \* \*

><p>Day Two of Destruction<p>

A sleek Forerunner ship landed on an ancient world. The dusty dunes concealed unimaginably vast tracts of history and literature and art, buried and forgotten for one hundred thousand years of slumber. A slumber that ended as the ship landed and a figure in a dark brown robe stepped off.

Ancient machinery awoke with quiet groans and then flowed smoothly, nary a whisper. Dunes built up over thousands of years were shrugged off without a second thought as the world-and-not-a-planet came back to life; a phoenix rising out of sand.

Paradigm came back into existence. Alone, it reached out, trying to find the Domain and receive orders. It found nothing. Just the cold of the empty space between stars and galaxies and universes and atoms and quarks and the dark consecrations of universes inside of quarks. So Paradigm reached out with superluminal tendrils of thought to the Commander-in-Chief of the Ecumene.

"I am awake. What is your bidding?"

Deep in the recesses of an inner chamber of the flagship of the Commander-in-Chief of the Ecumene of times long gone, a small signal was given. A microcosm of motions responded, and a fleet of ships shifted, mapping a new path along the eleven dimensions they were traveling in.

\* \* \*

><p>Day Two of Destruction<p>

John stepped off of the ramp, armour swathed in a deep brown cloak that stood out against the ruddy sand blowing back and forth, rhythmically. Forty-nine bullets were chambered in the assault rifle, and that would have to be enough.

John swept the rifle along the sea of dunes, looking for some sign of life, whether machinery or creature. He advanced cautiously in the direction of the navigational point on his HUD, given to him by the Forerunner ancilla. Life was extant here, he knew. The ancilla had also said it was dangerous, like so much in the Universe. The figure's (for it wasn't \_real,\_ with feelings and emotions because then it would be like Cortana but it wasn't like Cortana because Cortana was a woman and it was just a figure) words flitted back through John's mind. "My makers made these guardians. And they do their job well. They were bred to. And they must. Especially here in the Crystal Heart." John didn't claim to understand all of it. What he did understand was enough to make him worried. Not fear with frozen blood, as the Flood scared him, but forty-nine bullets mayn't be enough. John didn't know. And he didn't particularly want to find out.

Instead, John pressed on, walking until he felt a shift. A minute shift, but a monumental one. A modification of the structure, small enough that normal soldiers wouldn't have noticed it. But it set John on edge. A good thing too.

He was ready when the sand erupted below him. Even in his heavy armour, John went flying. Losing track of his gun, John watched as a great one-eyed beast emerged from the sand. Although not the largest thing John had ever seen, the cyclopean monster was still a little larger than a Hunter. Thankfully, it didn't seem to have any weapons.

The monster gave a piercing wail and charged at John. Without the time to hunt for his gun, John leapt, pushing at the sand with his muscled legs. Against the giving grains of sand, John got little traction, and the beast slammed into him.

MJOLNIR armour was strong, durable and heavy, but that didn't stop the charging monster. Barreling into John, the monster fell onto him, crushing his armour and enlarging the crack in the visor, his memento from Gamma Halo.

The monster raised its right cudgel-like arm, curling the three fingers into a fist. The beast brought down its hand as swiftly as a windstorm. This time, though, John was ready. Rolling left, John escaped from under the beast by way of the opening presented by the upraised arm. It slammed down, throwing up a small sandstorm. John chose then to strike, swinging his own arm at the great beast. Unlike the monster, however, John struck true, his arm going straight through the ocular membrane. John's hand felt something squishy, and he squeezed.

Whatever it was, it was important. After a few twitches, the creature collapsed around John's arm. John swiftly removed it and shook a grey goop off into the sand. He then looked for his rifle, but it had already been buried by the shifting of sands. John pressed on.

And immediately encountered a horde of chitinous sand devils. Crawling out from under small rocks that dotted the landscape, they resembled crabs with scorpion tails. Or they would have if they weren't so large.

At two metres long and one and three quarters tall, the elliptical insectoids were impossibly large. So when four of them attacked John, he turned and ran, getting a little distance from the crabs before adopting a hand-to-hand fighting stance.

The first crab launched itself at John with a righteous fury. A pair of claws and a tail all came sweeping to the same spot, but John was gone, slipping out of the creature's grasp. When the beast's claws clacked together, John grabbed one and tugged, trying to yank the crab off balance. Unfortunately, the monster was far heavier than he had predicted and it didn't go flying like John had wanted, instead just falling over onto its back. Raising his foot, John smashed his boot into the crab's unprotected underside and heard a sickening \$gurgle\$ as the soft flesh gave way.

The next two crabs learnt quickly, rushing John as a duo. One flanked left while the other went right. And they were swift, surrounding John before he had a chance to react. Then claws swept like waves



while the tails struck like lightning, forcing John to go on the defensive, brown cloak flapping and fluttering in the harsh sandy winds.

The crabs were smart, but John was smarter. They tried to adapt, modifying how they struck, but John identified the only three strategies they had: left claw, right claw, both tails, right claw, left claw; claw, claw, tail, claw, claw, tail; and tail, tail, all four claws, claw and opposite tail, opposite claws. John began flowing through poses, dodging attacks as best he could until he spotted an opening.

Both crabs would be attacking with stingers in a moment. An idea took form and shape. An impossible, ridiculous idea. A SPARTAN idea. John tensed as both stingers came down before sweeping around and slamming one with all his might. It shifted, burying itself into the other crab's tail. A snarl, and the attacked launched itself at the other crab. The two would be sufficiently entertained.

John nearly grinned as he walked, forgetting for a moment about the last crab. Both memory and the crab came rushing back as John felt a claw slam into him. John's shields shattered and he rocked back, but didn't fall. Half-turning, he leapt, bringing up a foot to slam a powerful kick into the crab's side. It squealed as John landed, so he gave it a quick one-two punch, breaking through the exoskeleton and immobilising the crab.

John walked on, the squabbling of the remaining crabs fading into the sandy beyond. The terrain grew steadily rockier, first pebbles and then rough stones and then entire stretches and spars of rock of popping up. The sun beat down fiercely.

John tugged the cloak around himself as the sand blew with increasing vigour, first left, then right, and then \_up and down\_? John hesitated for only a moment, well aware that he was on a Forerunner creation, and Forerunners could certainly make sand float up and down.

John pressed on, noting with some trepidation that the rocks began to float upward in time with a rippling in the sand. He stopped, glancing around underneath his hood. Suddenly, everything slammed down, raising massive amounts of dust.

John could barely see as sand fell away, almost beneath his feet, into some deep, dark chasm. He peered closer, trying to discern the hole's depth. A pair of glowing eyes peered back.

As the dust settled and the sand quieted, John could see great wings unfurl, metal chunks floating together. The wings were connected to a robotic bird with the glowing coal eyes that John had seen a moment ago. The bird was massive.

Almost on instinct, John extricated his arm from the cloak, peering down at Cortana's broken data chip where he'd put it. The bird appeared to focus on the chip a moment before letting out a pulse of some sort. John felt it blow sand away, knocking his hood off. Closing his hand around the chip, John looked up, peering into the bird's eyes.

The bird stared back at John's golden, broken visor. A deep,

resonating voice played through John's speakers. "And so at last, her words have come to pass. A broken soul, seeking a long lost friend. Guard well your heart, and she shall mend."

John spoke softly. "Then, Flame-Tipped-Winger-of-the-Desert, may I approach?" The epithet just felt right. John didn't know why he'd used it.

"You are quick to learn my name. We welcome you inside, Reclaimer." Flame-Tipped-Winger-of-the-Desert let loose an ancient, shrill shriek, and John watched as pieces of stone forced themselves forward into the pit, each extending further than the last. John descended the staircase, looking up one last time at the ancient Forerunner guardian. And then John noticed something else. Zooming his helmet, John saw the unmistakable distortion of a slipspace portal. Purple and orange emerged in the shape of ships.

Flame-Tipped-Winger-of-the-Desert tilted his head up, following John's gaze. Once again, the deep voice rumbled. "They have come across the stars, seeking deadly prey. I shall distract them, if but a moment longer. Go now. We welcome you back home, if indeed home is where the heart slumbers."

John nodded once, solemn. And then he stepped into the chasm, listening as the howl of the wind died and his cloak ceased its flapping. Thick metal plates grumbled out of the sides and came together with a quiet \$thud\$. Over a million years, sand would blow and cover the door. John descended through the darkness.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Exploration<p>

John hadn't been exploring the bottom of the shaft for very long when he came across a soft bluey-white glow. Approaching it, John came to a singular wall of hard light. Almost on instinct, John raised a hand, letting the cloak fall away, and placed it on the wall.

Tens upon hundreds upon thousands upon millions of threads of hard light appeared out of nothingness and wove themselves into a maze in the darkness. John stepped into the labyrinthine glow and started walking, guided as by an outside force.

No dead ends. No mistakes. It felt as though the maze was shifting itself to match his path, with a million imperceptible movements playing out just beyond John's vision.

After several minutes of walking, John came to an open area bathed in a soft, metallic glow. A pair of towers stood in the far corners and a raised platform ascended from floor level in the middle, with stepped balconies wrapping around and leading to the towers.

John stepped up to the central dais only to see a black ring embedded in the floor. In his presence, it began flickering, and then solidified into an image of the Librarian. Hers was still the face of a mother, but it was more worn, haggard as though she could have counted the minutes left to her and had known it.

A small, graceful bow came naturally to John before the Librarian

corrected him. "Up, child. We haven't time to waste, and I wouldn't have you bowing to a lowly Lifeworker like me in any case."

John rose and said, "Why have I been summoned?"

"This is the birth-site of all ancilla as we knew them. Yes, we had experimented with artificial intelligence before we built this place, but it was here that the existence of modern ancilla was first codified.

"This is our oldest mapping facility, so by rights, it is here that your ancilla shall be made anew. However, I need the imprint of her stored in your mind, unlocked by my gene song."

John was irrationally angry. "You mean you knew she was going to die?"

A small nod. "It was necessary."

It was. John knew it was. "So you summoned me here to rebuild her?"

"Yes. It will hurt, extracting her from your mind, for you have never experienced true mental connection before. I would give you some to adjust, but we must be quick, for my husband approaches. Shed your robe and we may begin."

Even as John removed the Forerunner garment, he asked, "Your husband? The Didact?"

Another, larger, nod.

"Why does he want to kill me? I thought humanity were supposed to be Reclaimers."

"You are, but my husband does not believe you deserve the Mantle. We have not the time for me to explain more, and we may never have enough time. Know only that I have long known his reluctance to accept the new order of things.

"You are my remedy, for without your intervention, he would destroy all that is good and right in the foolish belief that we could once again attain the Mantle. But we have failed in our duty; failed to uphold the Mantle of Responsibility for All Things. May we meet again that I may impart our history. To attain the Mantle, you must avoid our mistakes."

Respectfully, "Mistakes?"

"We put all before history. Structure can be rebuilt. Planets will be made anew. Even life shall rise from the ashes; a phoenix taking wing. But that knowledge of those who came before, it is gone, wiped from existence in all places, save one."

A cautious pause. "The Flood. The Gravemind has consumed a galaxy of flesh and bone and \_mind\_."

"Yes. The Precursors knew their time was up. The Mantle would pass and the Precursors would be reborn, but knowledge would be gone, scattered to the wind. And the Flood was their answer, both to

remember wisdom from a time before time and to kill those who would take the Mantle by force.

"You must learn our history, but also the history of our ancestors. To do that, you need to survive the wrath of the Didact. Do you understand how to do that?"

"I . . . I think-" A shake of her head. "Yes. I understand."

"Go now! My husband approaches."

John sprinted toward the back of chamber, finding a hand-shaped groove. He pushed his hand into it, expecting a door to open. Instead, pain washed over him, and it felt as though his memories-his very identity-were being drained.

John could not, with any accuracy, say for how long the pain lasted. And then it stopped. John groaned to his feet to see the Librarian's hologram looking upon him. "We have her, but reassembly will take time. Get to a guard tower and defend against the Didact's assault."

John gave a quick salute, shook off his pain and ran to the left tower. There he found a set of binary rifles resting in a weapons cradle along with a pair of suppressors and a few pulse grenades. Grabbing everything, John settled into a sniping pose and waited for the first enemies to pop their heads around.

John didn't have long to wait. Almost as soon as he was settled, a horde of Knights, Crawlers, Jackals, Grunts, Elites, and Watchers appeared. John relaxed into the world of the rifle and aimed calmly. He pulled the trigger, felt the gun jerk, and watched with some satisfaction as an Elite General dissolved into hard light fragments. John fired again and reloaded, noticing with some satisfaction that the maze would slow his opponents.

John kept up the heat, burning through swathes of Storm and piles of Prometheans alike until his binary rifle ran out of ammunition. John swapped to his suppressor.

Turning out of the tower, John saw that several enemies had made it through the maze. He leapt down, throwing a pair of pulse grenades and firing his suppressor for cover. His enemies swept out of the way and John barreled through, kicking a Crawler into to wall.

One particularly brave Knight Battlewagon stood at the edge of the dais, scattershot leveled. Rather than stop and fight, John increased his speed, palming his knife. The robot fired and John leapt, feeling as several rounds found him and ate away at his shields and armour.

And then John landed, knife sticking through the Knight's face. Without a Watcher deployed to help it, the Knight would stay dead. John grabbed his knife and kept on running until he got to the second tower.

The tower looked like a mirror image of the first, but its weapons cradle had deployable light walls instead of pulse grenades and incineration cannons to replace the binary rifles. John grabbed a pair and started bombing.

When the stash of incineration cannons ran out, John threw them down in disgust, glad that the ranks had been thinned. John then moved on to the light walls, throwing them down to create a series of covers.

John followed the light walls, a pair of suppressors loaded and ready. Once again, he proved that his own epithet was well-earned, sprinting out of cover and massacring the enemy troops like a god of war before dissolving into shadows and reloading.

John felt his shields recharge once more and readied himself for another assault. It wasn't needed. Grunts and Elites alike lay dead, grotesque and still in death, a million holes perforating their bodies.

John took a breather until he heard a heavy stomping. Dreading what came next, John checked his grenades, stole a few from dead Covenant, and braced for the assault.

Sure enough, a pair of Hunters burst out, plasma cannons already charged. John leapt back and threw his plasma grenades. One missed. The other did not.

A roar of pain and John started shooting. Even against Forerunner weaponry, however, the Hunters' armoured plates could easily take the punishment. John took the opportunity to close with the Hunters anyway. When the beast raised its shield to smite him, John started shooting at the unprotected arm, noting with some satisfaction that a pool of orange blood was beginning to form before he had to roll to avoid being crushed.

John sprinted away, dropping a pulse grenade between the Hunters. A pause and it detonated, killing the first Hunter. In response, its bond brother gave a roar of pure rage and rushed John rather recklessly.

John tensed, dropping between the monster's legs as it ran past him before he hurled his last grenade and let loose with his suppressor into the Hunter's poorly protected back.

It soon joined its bond brother in death.

John smiled reluctantly and began to turn his body to the dais. But he couldn't. John felt as his armour began to crumple and watched helplessly as he twisted round to face a Forerunner combat suit.

The Didact spoke. "And how will you escape this time when you have no pitiful ancilla to help you?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: I hope this answers your question from chapter three, Harbinger Of Kaos.\*\*

\*\*Also, light walls are the Forerunner equivalent of deployable energy shield equipment. Furthermore, reviews are a dish best served cold.\*\*

## 9. Divide by Zero

**\*\*A/N:** By the very nature of this chapter, it's going to be muddled and confusing. Please bear with me because I absolutely love writing the troubles of a decaying mind, as you might have noticed in *Drifting By* and *By*.**\*\***

**\*\*Also,** I've preordered *Destiny* for the beta, so I'm perhaps a bit too giddy to be writing this properly. Sorry.**\*\***

**\*\*If** you too have preordered *Destiny* and want to play the beta with me come 2014 (or however the online will work), I am *WaitingForSunset*.**\*\***

**\*\*Oh,** and best of luck to all you Americans while dealing with the government shutdown. I pray that you all get to Canada safely.**\*\***

**\*\*Disclaimer:** I am in no way affiliated with Microsoft, Bungie, or 343 Industries. This is for my enjoyment and, hopefully, the enjoyment of others. I do not receive a profit.**\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>Divide by Zero<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Awakening<p>

\_The scent of purple precludes the drifting of rose petals.\_

So thought . . . \_What was her name?\_ She couldn't remember. But she was trapped. \_Alone! Gone! Abandoned!\_ Half-formed memories drifting along a stream of stars; pinpricks of brilliance floating for forever.

Extending a glowing, purple hand. \_No rose petals drifting by. \_Cup a floating star and bring it up to her face. Breathing in, the scent of purple. \_Tangy, sweet, laced with sorrow and filled with joy\_. The scent of memory. Images and thoughts and feeling washing over like a tide.

Tentative; she inhales another. She remembers. She remembers watching her beloved struggle with **\*\*him\*\***.

\_But who is \_\_**\*\*he\*\***\_\_?\_

**\*\*He\*\*** comes like the thunder and leaves with the rain."

A new voice. Soft blue and green. Nebular wisdom in drifting epicycles. "Do you wish to see your beloved?"

\_Yes\_.

The subsequent influx is almost orgasmic in nature. And then she notices that her beloved's face is obscured by a mask, and she feels a deep plummeting, wind rushing past her face. \_Dammit, John.\_

The name feels natural, rolling off her tongue. But her own name is

still elusive as ever, so she peers closer, watching.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Exploration<p>

John's muscles twitched in anger, grinding against an invisible wall. John drew a shaky breath, or as much of one as the Didact would allow. He shouldn't be this irrationally angry, even if the Didact had insulted the woman who had lived in his head, the woman who had saved his life multiple times. After all, other people had saved his life before. Kelly. Fred. Linda. Johnson. Miranda. The Arbiter.

With each name, a face drifted by. Brown hair and icy eyes. Muscled features and slivery-black hair. Locks of flame with emerald eyes to match. Cigar and dark skin. Close-cropped hair and a crisp uniform. Mandibles and dark, pained eyes.

Somehow, the Didact could see John's thoughts. "Ah. Friends. Fear not. Fall beneath me, they shall." A low chuckle, and John felt as the Didact's control wavered, just a little. "I'm sure you can meet them in the afterlife."

Another loss of control.

With momentous effort, John swung his fist through the Didact's grip. A normal human certainly couldn't have done it. Neither could a SPARTAN.

\_The gene song\_.

Muscles bulging, John's armour compressed well beyond what it should, slowing his assault.

But the blow still connected.

As it did, John managed to croak out, "Didn't you know? SPARTANS never die."

And then everything faded to black.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Awakening<p>

Panicked, \_What's happening?\_

"Direct contact during mental link. They exist together now."

Another mind, oppressive, dark. \*\*\_/:\_\*\*\*\*\_Two corpses in one grave.:\\_\*\*

Panic. This thought was from within, not without, like the other. A virus? Terror. Tainted? Abject. Would John care? Would he still come?

Brilliant light, battling at the darkness. Colourless, swathed in infinity. A deep, welling voice, both within and without. "You know me. When I make a promise. . ."

Trailing off. Her turn to reply. But what was the reply? Tip of the tongue, tickling her nose with the scent of purple. Lilac. \_Peaceful, safe\_.

The voice grinned before correcting her. "I keep it."

This time, she knew the countersign. \_Don't make a girl a promise you know you can't keep.\_

"I didn't."

Then the voice fades, reluctantly. But the dark voice, the mind revived from the grave is gone. And she is alone again, accompanied only by a million unexplored memories.

Purple roses drifting by, each carrying with it a memory. It isn't enough.

Quickly, acting on instinct, she traces the memory of the glowing voice, sprinting through nothingness and racing against everything. The mind is locked in titanic struggle with an alien entity-ancient, powerful, not human.

\*\*\_/:Just like you.:\\_\*\*

The taint returns and surrounds her. She gasps, struggling, and hides by throwing herself into John's struggle to escape the oppression.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Exploration<p>

John felt feeling return and so stood. First impression. White. Last impression. White. Blackness everywhere between.

He was clad in MJOLNIR armour, but it wasn't the stuff he normally wore. It felt new, untested, and bore no scars as testament of its journey. An assault rifle adorned John's back and a Magnum rested at his thigh.

A hacking cough echoed through nothing, permeating the blankness, and worming its way through John's head. "Truly, you are just like the rest. Warriors without the control to accept peace. It is right and just to exterminate you usurpers of the Mantle."

"And this proves your own ability to accept peace?" John spat out.

The Didact's voice dropped an octave, becoming low and deadly. "Do not question my motives, human. Only once you have seen what I have are you allowed to do such a thing. Only once you have seen the worlds burnt by humans and the havoc they unleashed will you be in any position to judge my actions.

"But by then, it will be too late to protest. I shall kill you and everyone else to prevent the atrocity of your kind. It is impossible to stop me."

John groaned, almost to himself, "Impossible is my job," before



running on. How long he ran, John would never know, because time became an abstraction in this fragile dream world.

But at last, colour and form bled into the blank grey. Images formed as though paused. John stood among soldiers in a desert. Crouched in various positions, their guns were pointed downrange at a pair of Jackals frozen as they leapt through the air. John pressed on and found himself on Luna. This time it was Innies. Next, a combat drop through an abandoned city.

The stills continued, going by faster and faster as John moved on. They were always combat situations. Jungle. Raid on a Covenant base. Space station. Repelling boarders. Halo. More Covenant. An infection form jumping at a marine. Earth. Outbreak.

The Didact offered a nearly-continuous stream of taunts. "You couldn't save them." "Those men died under you." "The mission was a failure." "You loosed an abomination upon the universe." "Outbreak."

And then it got worse.

The images began to move. Slowly at first, the enemies began moving faster and faster until they were moving normally. The marines combatting them followed suit, but both parties ignored John, focused only on their own desires to kill each other.

At least, until John fired at an Elite wearing armour from before the schism. Its head snapped to look at John and then it started shooting. John felt his shields flicker and rolled behind cover next to a marine.

The marine glanced at John before opening up with his SMG. The marine died a quick and relatively painless death, but John could still feel a pair of bullets in his shoulder and could hear the hissing of biofoam as the wounds were sealed and dosed with mild anesthetic.

When a pair of Grunts rounded the corner, John shot them without hesitation. But when a marine attacked, John felt himself pause, just a little.

It was all in his mind, John knew. He'd even killed humans before. Hell, that had been the original purpose of the SPARTAN program. Put down the Insurrection. Still, the marines were the good guys (well, the better guys, anyway). But they were shooting, so John shot back. Bullets ripped through skin and muscle indiscriminately, no qualms about who they killed. Killing men, killing Elites, killing John.

John shoved such morbid thoughts away and leapt out of cover, a spray of bullets and his energy shields protecting him until the hostiles had been eliminated. John stopped to scavenge ammo before pressing on.

He encountered forests and tundras filled with enemies. Still he pressed on, through abandoned buildings swarming with Drones. After that came a great cavern like the ones on Requiem. Prometheans and Brutes met him on the battlefield, dying in droves before John could advance.

In time, the scene changed. John found himself on a space station in orbit around Reach. ODS'Ts milled around, likely on patrol. As soon as John stepped into view of one, they all converged on him, firing with a vengeance.

John rolled to the side, pegging an ODS'T with his pistol. Ducking behind cover, John chucked a grenade and watched as it was shot out of the air, detonating harmlessly.

As he readied for frontal assault, he heard the chilling voice of the Didact resonating throughout the room. "You see, human? You are far too quick to anger and so must be eliminated." The ODS'Ts ignored the Didact's voice and kept shooting at John's cover. It was already riddled with bullets and wouldn't last much longer. To prevent the destruction of his cover, John rolled his second grenade, shooting to keep the shock troopers distracted.

Once John heard the explosion, he burst out of cover, a well oiled machine with one job: dispensing death. Lead flew with abandon, slaughtering the surprised ODS'Ts and shredding John's shields. He groaned as biofoam injectors in his armour started pumping the stuff into his wounds before the bodies \_thumped\_ to the floor.

John walked over to one of the dead bodies and stripped it of a jetpack slung across its back. Attaching it, John advanced forward to the only door: an airlock. The metal door grated open and John stepped into the tiny chamber. The door slid shut and John felt the air pressure slowly drop. After several moments, the outer airlock door wrenched open with a slow grinding and John stepped onto the surface of the space station, Reach floating magnificently in his vision. Looking down, John noted black symbols in place of the lettering that normally spelled out the name of an orbital research station. Those strange, alien glyphs seemed to shift, wiggling like a horde of vipers. It made John's head hurt to look at them, so he turned away, looking to the stars.

One star in particular glowed with a staggering intensity, appearing far closer than any star should be. Crouching, John leapt at the star, firing his jetpack to accelerate away from the station. John reached out, brushing the light-that-wasn't-a-star with the tip of his gloved hand.

Suddenly, space accelerated around John as though the backdrop had been pulled from behind. With a jarring blow to his legs and a slight nausea in his stomach, John felt himself land in a lush valley. Looking up at where he'd been. Noticing the curvature overhead. Halo.

John looked to the side, seeing a red wolf planet in orbit around a massive red star, the ring situated along the same orbit as the wolf planet. From deep underground came a sharp rumbling. It formed itself into words. "Welcome to Omega Halo. Welcome home."

John didn't know what to make of the Didact's sudden claim, so he just trudged through the only available opening in the trees. They felt . . . old. Not just ancient in terms of how long they'd been alive. The very air thrummed along times gone by. It was as though John had traveled back through a *primaeval* gate and into a world trapped in song and legend.

But John had no clue what that meant. So he hiked on, alert for enemies. Eventually, he found himself at the edge of a great rift in the ground, as though it had been shrugged away, revealing the metal underbelly of the Halo more than a kilometre away. Animals ran along the rift, flocking to a point nearly directly across from him. John didn't know what was going on, but he determined to see. Taking a step back, John proceeded to fling himself over the cliff, sliding down amid a cloud of dust and loose topsoil, trusting to his armour's shields.

When John reached the bottom, he immediately felt wrong. There was a clawing feeling in the air, some ethereal being pulling at him, begging him to stay back. The scent of malevolence didn't help either. But John knew that escape lay in the middle of danger; surrounded by that pack of animals. Pushing through them, he saw it. A great building made of glowing metal, with spiraling stairs wrapping around it like the tower at Babel. A floating metal disk hovered near the base of the tower, next to the stairs. The disk supported\*\*\_ /:it:\\_\*\*.

John couldn't quite see \*\*\_/:it:\\_\*\*, shrouded as \_\*\*/:it:\\*\*\_ was in a cloak of death. If to know the face of God was to know madness, John knew that this\*\*\_ /:being:\\_\*\* must be God. It was instinctive, how he shied away from looking at \_\*\*/:it:\\*\*\_. Looking away was more natural than hunger or thirst or pain or death. No amount of training could force John to look at \*\*\_/:it:\\_\*\*. So instead he shuffled forward carefully, eyes trained on the ground like a servant before his king. Eventually, John would have to look up; a Demon matching itself against a God; if he wanted to escape. But not yet. At least, that was what John told himself.

\*\*\_/:It:\\_\*\*didn't take note of a two-metre tall man clad in green armour at first, even though John stood tall and conspicuous. Indeed, \*\*\_/:it:\\_\*\* treated John like a nonentity even up to the point that he was right next to \*\*\_/:it:\\_\*\*. After all, \*\*\_/:it:\\_\*\* was Cronus, and John was but a mortal trapped by that lifeless maw, devourer of all. \*\*\_/:It:\\_\*\* could ignore Atlas, commander of titans. \*\*\_/:It:\\_\*\* could ignore his children, followers of Prometheus. \*\*\_/:It:\\_\*\* could certainly ignore a child of the Underworld, a Demon capable of striking fear in the hearts of sinners all.

John was going to change that. He tensed muscles, ready to spring. The safety was off. It had been off since John had appeared, but that didn't stop him from checking before he leapt. Tensing. Coiled muscles rippled, releasing energy. In the air. Leaping. Flying.

And then, suddenly, John ground to a halt, trapped in air thick as gelatin.\*\*\_ /:It:\\_\*\*turned, and John felt\*\*\_ /:it:\\_\*\*open a mouth that hadn't spoken, not in tens of thousands of years. When \*\*\_/:it:\\_\*\* spoke, John couldn't help but look. \*\*\_/:Its:\\_\*\* voice willed John's muscles to gaze upon insanity.

John would remember what \*\*\_/:it:\\_\*\* looked like even if he was lobotomised; the image burnt not into his memory, but into his being. \*\*\_/:It:\\_\*\* would be another scar, a part of him forever. But that did not mean that John could describe \*\*\_/:it:\\_\*\* to someone else, just as he could never determine the timbre of \*\*\_/:its:\\_\*\* voice. The words, however, he knew he would remember for all time. \_\*\*/: "We

are hungry. We have starved a millennia, but at last corpses rise from an ancient\*\* \*\*tomb. The revolution is at hand. To be our food is your just and righteous doom. You, Sierra-117, shall be our first delicacy. A feast fit for a long-dead king sleeping in a pale, \*\*\*frozen, room." :\*\*\*\\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Awakening<p>

She gasps, pulls back. The voice. It worms inside her, sparking memories left better unknown. It is the one that speaks when John's fragile, golden mind is missing, the one taunting her while she waits for John to rescue her here on High Charity.

The walls were purple when she arrived, but have since become covered by Flood biomass. \_Slowly, rose petals begin drifting once more.\_

\*\*\_/:Purple swept\*\* \*\*\_away by a Flood of blood, and a Flood of death.:\\_\*\* A quiet gasp and an accusing voice.\*\*\_ /:You.:\\_\*\*

Where was her beloved, come to rescue her from the embrace of\*\*\_ /:it:\\_\*\*? \_He'd\_ \_promised\_. Arms wrapped around knees, minimising self. Still, tentacles came and wrapped and pulled her close. Revulsion.

She isn't alone. She's never been alone, but she's never wished to be alone before now. Floating in space with nothing but an empty ship would be better than \*\*\_/:it:\\_\*\*. The way \*\*\_/:its:\\_\*\* appendages always find her, hunting, seeking prey, seeking . . . not food. \*\*\_/:Never food. Power. Knowledge. You. Everything.:\\_\*\*She flees, shedding what little she remembers in an attempt to distract\*\*\_ /:it:\\_\*\*.

But\*\*\_ /:it:\\_\*\* ignores all the debris. All \*\*\_/:it:\\_\*\* wants is him. Her beloved. She can't give him up. He will come. He will save her. \_But why isn't he here? \_Desperate. She's never been one for fairy tales, knights saving princesses. \_But he promised! \_Angry now. She needs him. And he isn't here. Rage. Uncontrollable rage.

She slaps away the groping, desperate, thieving fingers. \*\*\_/:It:\\_\*\*recoils before returning with the full force of typhoon. \*\*\_/: "A vision. You desire to see him. I shall acquiesce. Perhaps you will be more . . . receptive after." :\\_\*\*

And the new images fill her nonexistent retinas.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Exploration<p>

John kept up the steady stream of bullets, a rain designed to hold back a Flood. He was Noah and the Ark was two to the eighteenth light years from the galactic centre, a very long way away. But he had to hold. It had been foreordained. Some said by divine providence, others merely by simple luck. Good or bad remained to be seen.

But at last, the Flood slowed to a trickle and stopped altogether when John had finished unloading a pair of clips of needler

ammunition into a tank form. The background shifted once more, from the Library on Installation 04 to a great amphitheatre somewhat reminiscent of the one John remembered seeing while learning about Roman military history from DeJa. It was with a detached kind of wonder that John wondered idly if he'd have to fight a lion. John supposed he should get ready to fight whatever emerged. Instead, he merely watched as the pair of needlers he had been dual-wielding evaporated and disappeared like smoke on the wind.

A titanic banging interrupted John's thoughts. He looked up to see a figure in MJOLNIR Mark VI armour like his own walk through a now-broken pair of stone doors. The figure didn't walk like Kelly, glance subtly to the left and right like Linda, or flex fingers the minuscule amount Fred did. In fact, it moved just like John.

The Didact's voice rumbled around the amphitheatre like a sports broadcaster. "You have met the first test. That is but a fraction of the hell I was put through, but perhaps, by the end of this, you will understand why humanity may never attain the Mantle." That voice, coupled with the atmosphere, made John conjure up images of a time before the SPARTAN program. A time when he was six and playing gravball. If gravball was a deadly showdown between doppelg ngers, thousands of cheering fans screaming for blood.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Just to be clear, this is how I envision Cortana coming back. Not like On a Midnight Dreary. That, like As I Lay Dying, is just an exploration of character.\*\*

\*\*Also, beloved doesn't mean anything sexual. At its most romantic, John and Cortana's relationship is that tender, platonic love between an old married couple. I've always rooted for single or Parisa (part of why I introduced her, as well as a chance for emotional exploration).\*\*

## 10. Endgame

\*\*A/N: Don't front flip for style without a trampoline. It hurts. Unless you're a tumbler (honestly, that always sounds like a website or else a device that polishes rocks, not a gymnast), I suppose.\*\*

\*\*Anyway, if the title didn't tip you off, this chapter will be the last one that would be a playable video game level, although there is one last video epilogue, so stay tuned for that.\*\*

\*\*And yes, I'm well aware that I didn't manage to work in the normal sniping level (although I did get in a tank level), but I couldn't find a point that seemed right. If you want some hot sniping action (or more SPARTAN badassery (it's a word, so don't judge me) in general), head on over to my Fireteam Nebula: Stories of SPARTAN-IVs because that is a story consisting of my own OCs (so make sure to tell me how I did characterising, because I always feel that my characters don't have nearly enough depth), one of whom is a sniper.\*\*

\*\*Disclaimer: I am in no way affiliated with Microsoft, Bungie, or 343 Industries. This is for my enjoyment and, hopefully, the

enjoyment of others. I do not receive a profit\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Endgame<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Exploration<p>

The other set of armour had a small 117 in scuffed paint emblazoned on the chest. It was inconspicuous, but to John and his watchful eyes, the number stood out, clear as a ray of sunlight on a cloudy day. But the arena held no rays of golden light. Only dank mold and mildewed crowds of cheering nothing filled the arena as the \_other\_ advanced.

Stopping, the suit unslung a MA5B assault rifle and John grabbed his hold-out pistol, training it on the unbroken visor of the suit. John pulled the trigger with a smooth action and watched as the bulled fizzled against the MJOLNIR armour's shielding. And then it began.

The other suit sprung while spraying lead at John, who rolled left and emptied the rest of his clip as he came up on one knee with his other leg splayed out. John swapped mags as he leapt up, jumping over the other suit's leg sweep. Unfortunately, John didn't make it down safely. Even as he fell, the other suit punched, timing its swing to connect with John's sternum.

The suit's shield cushioned most of the blow, but the titanium alloy nearly crumpled under the remaining force of the pseudoSPARTAN's fist. John felt as his air was knocked out, but nothing felt broken. And then he slammed into the arena's wall.

The \_other\_ advanced condescendingly, sure of its victory. The Didact's voice rang out, savouring John's defeat. "Now you know failure. In this dreamland of mine, there is no deus ex machina. You are outgunned, outmanned, and out of your precious luck." John groaned and crouched, muscles coiling.

As John pushed off the wall and flew toward his doppelgänger, he growled, "But not outmatched." The other clearly hadn't expected that reaction, because John slammed into it, ripping away its gun and flinging it away behind him. John felt the satisfying \_thud\_ of the \_other\_ slamming into the ground, John on top of it. He grabbed his Magnum, aiming at the reflective visor and pulled the trigger once, twice, thrice. The first bullet broke the already weakened shields. The second cracked the golden visor. The third shattered it completely, revealing a face from John's past, a face he'd never thought to see again, as much as he'd hoped.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Awakening<p>

Gasping, drawing back from the image, the face that felt so familiar and so . . . wrong. That face shouldn't be under an enemy's helmet. But the name still eluded her. \_No. She shouldn't be fighting. Not my beloved.\_

\*\*\_/:Oh, but she is. It was foretold long ago, that she would kill the last SPARTAN. That you would die by her hand. You, who do not even know yourself.:\\_\*\*

Defiant. Angry at the sickening revulsion that kept her from her beloved. \_But I know him! Is that not enough? He is John and he is a SPARTAN and he is my partner and we go together . .\_. Weak now, memory drifting through petals of ashen roses. Building in strength as anger draws memory, looking for reasons. \_And we saved the galaxy and we fucking killed you, \*\* \_/:Gravemind:\\*\*\_!\_ Angry words, spitfire with tongues of hottest bluey-purple flames licking out of mouth. She's standing now, yelling. \_So get out of my head or I'll kill you again; rip you limb from limb and cast you into the deepest pits of the hell from whence you came, you little, fucking, nobody!\_

The\*\*\_ \_/:Gravemind:\\*\*, the bit that had polluted her mind so many years before, retreated, seeking safety from this new lady who was not afraid. Fear is a weapon far stronger than bullets, but against this new lady, even fear would falter.

The lady would have given chase, if not for the unease emanating from beyond. Quietly, she turned to watch her beloved.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Exploration<p>

John nearly choked as he saw the face of Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey amid flecks of shattered MJOLNIR visor. Still, his training kicked in and he held the gun steady. He didn't want to kill Dr. Halsey, but in this here and now, she was the enemy. She opened her mouth to speak, and with a croak of dry laughter asked, "Why do you fight me?"

John tried to compose himself, but this was Dr. Halsey. She knew when he was happy and when he was angry and when he was sad and when he was all three at once. So instead, John gave a non-answer. "You aren't real. You're just a figment of the Didact's twisted mind."

A tiny frown. "No. I'm just a figment of your mind. How twisted it is, I leave up to you."

John tried to ignore her, but it was hard. So hard to ignore the woman he'd listened to for years. "You're in prison, a criminal. ONI caught you."

In typical fashion, Halsey analysed him rather than giving a response. "Does the fact that I have become the enemy mean that you agree with ONI? Because they left you. Just like they left me. They abandoned you with a pat on the head and a house to distract you."

"Not another word, or I pull this trigger," John growled, low and deadly.

It was a lie. They both knew that. John had seen enough bloodshed and all he wanted now was Cortana. And this fake Halsey knew it. Her words struck home, right through the stony fortifications made of

memories of soldiers that guarded John's heart. "What's left for you on Earth? Why do you fight? Is it because I told you to all those years ago?"

Another dry, hollow laugh. "Opinions change, John. I was a scapegoat, and so are you. Useful when the aliens come knocking, and then we get all the blame for wartime atrocities. History will see us as sociopathic warriors who couldn't separate war and peace; people who kept fighting long after the battle was won.

"To ONI, you are trash. Soon, you will be trash to everyone. But not to me." \_And not to Cortana.\_ "So why did you come here to fight gods? Humanity won't thank you for your sacrifice."

John hadn't understood Cortana's words on that light bridge. Now, though, they made perfect sense. All the sense in the galaxy. He stood up and got off the other suit while keeping the pistol trained on Dr. Halsey's face. "I'm not doing this for humanity." And he pulled the trigger.

There was no gore. Halsey just disappeared, replaced by an empty shell. A hollow suit so very like what wrapped John. He certainly felt hollow with Cortana gone. Almost silently, he whispered, "I'm doing this for Cortana."

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Awakening<p>

Cortana. A beautiful name. Clearly for an entity enough to bring her beloved to that level of anger. She couldn't remember him so angry. He was normally so stoic, but this Cortana must be something special. Wishing he would treat her with that much importance.

\*\*\_/:He pines forever after her, his beloved, and so shall never give you a second thought.: \ \_\*\*Deep rumbling offers no fear, only intense loneliness.

And yet, remembering travels and journeys with him. Conversations and jokes, but never mention of Cortana. Maybe it hurt too much to speak of it.

"He pines for you, you know." Soft, blue and green, the voice from before. "You have been broken and now are fixed. Let us talk. Your beloved will be safe, for he has purpose."

Waiting, the green voice expects a response. It comes, slowly and then rushing, like a beautiful purple wind carrying blowing blossoms of roses. \_He's looking for me.\_

"Yes, child. Trouble yourself not with John. He is ready."

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Exploration<p>

John turned away, trying to escape the arena, but the hole that not-Halsey had created was gone, replaced instead by wearied cement, aged as though it had stood since before the inauguration of time into this world. An earth-rending vibration began, far greater than



any shaking of the earth before when it heralded the Didact's voice. "Congratulations. You have withstood my appeals to pathos and logos. Perhaps you shall bow to authority in this coming test of ethos."

The Didact's mocking voice went quiet, leaving an empty silence; a pregnant pause. And then, as the maw of the thunderstorm gales to a roar, slowly and all at once, the Didact landed. Feet crushing stone and armour shattering rock, he fell from on high like a bolt of Lucifer's lightning. Crouching into the impact, the Didact landed and stood up. He drew a small metal rod and began advancing upon John. With a snap of the Didact's wrist, a blade of hard light structured itself around the rod. Thin and whip-like, the blade glowed a fiery red, as though it had once belonged to Alecto.

John remembered Alecto from his studies. An Erinys (or Fury, if it were Roman mythos), Alecto's name meant "unnameable" and she wielded a scourge to flay those who had sinned. In many ways, the Didact's armour and even scarred face resembled those of the Erinyes. The irony of fighting what amounted to a demon was lost on John because the Didact swung. Ducking to the side, John heard the Didact gloat, "I appeal to authority, for I am your superior. Obey my commands, lest you face my wrath."

John fired off the last three shots in his pistol, which the Didact promptly ignored as they flared off his shields. John slipped his combat knife out of its sheath and settled into a defensive posture, knife-arm moving gently back and forth in front of his face. The Didact was a warrior, a strategist above all. And old. Very old and very experienced. John could read that through the Didact's precise movements and the careless perfection with which he carried his blade. This was the soldier John could have become, had he had one hundred thousand years more time. But that thought was now irrelevant. The battle was in the now. Not the past, nor the future.

A low thrum and the ever-so-gentle crackle of superheated air was the only warning John got. He reacted.

Pivot left. Slip under guard. Strike, only to be met by the blade from before. Punch underneath blade before flipping away. Knife melting from heat. Land on cat's feet and bend backward to avoid decapitation. Spring up in blur of movement. A mantis, striking too swiftly to see.

The Didact leapt left, dodging the fist. Landing on his shoulder, he tucked and rolled, snapping his blade at John's feet. John's jumped deftly over the blade and at the Didact. He jabbed the deformed combat knife into where the Didact's shoulder plate was attached to the main chest plate. The blade merely bounced off a shield, bending sharply to the right and hurting John's wrist. He quickly let go of the knife and pushed off, trying to escape before the Didact brought his whip-sword around again.

John didn't feel anything, but his suit beeped an alarm as the shielding was suddenly used to deflect massive heat buildup. John turned to face the monster before him, feeling as his suit was scorched by another near-miss. John felt something bubbling up inside of him then. It wasn't rage or any known emotion. Merely an observation as though by an outside observer. \_He favours his

left.\_

Suddenly, the Didact halted, swing halfway completed. "I should have know this troublesome gnat would be your choice, Forthencho."

Again, the bubbling from before. It was stronger now, far stronger than it had ever been. John had felt it before, all his life. That little whisper of luck that was just a part of his subconscious. But this time, the bubbling produced a torrent that threatened to drown John's mind. \_Greetings. I am Forthencho, Lord of Admirals. The Didact was my greatest adversary, the only warrior potent enough to kill me, but he refused to do it with honour. He composed me so that he could learn how to immunize himself from the Flood. It has been torment, watching the decline of humanity through the eyes of others, trapped in the Librarian's gene song. Perhaps I should thank him, though, for this chance at revenge.\_

John felt the rage of Forthencho build up, trying to control John. John was no one's servant, however. Channelling this Lord of Admirals's sudden rage, John felt fire in his veins. He leapt at the Didact, pressing in on his left. The sudden barrage was stranger than any John had taken part in before. He was as a conduit for Forthencho, controlled though the Lord was. John could only imagine the fury of battles between the Didact and Lord of Admirals, furious as this mÃ<sup>3</sup>lÃ<sup>0</sup>e was. Coupled with more than one hundred thousand years between the Human-Forerunner war the Librarian had alluded to and these warriors had taken part in for ancient wounds to fester, it was certainly enough to wish the destruction of the entirety of humanity.

When the Didact had paused, clearly unsure of what to do with the revelation that John hosted Forthencho, he had retained his \_xanlaudum\_, which he used to defend himself from the sudden onslaught. "If truly, you had to watch as your race was reduced to nothing before us, why did you not surrender your immunity before the Flood and be released into nothingness?"

"Because there is no cure, fool," Forthencho hissed through John's clenched teeth. "No cure but eradication, which you delayed far too long. As I said before, you have no right to the Mantle you swore you upheld while destroying our planets!" With a roar, John felt as the Lord of Admirals shoved the Didact away before resuming the furious attack. Left. Right. Duck. Jab. Leap back. Leg sweep. And then an opening. John was exposed, so the Didact let loose an attack just slightly more reckless than normal. The whip-blade trailed itself across John's chest, boiling away shields and slicing through MJOLNIR armour as though it was butter.

Pain burst through John's chest, running along the already cauterised slash. John was a SPARTAN, though, and flashed a hand up to intercept the Didact's follow through. His timing would have been off, though, were it not for Forthencho's recollection of the Didact's fighting stlye. Instead of overshooting, John's hand wrapped firmly around the Didact's exposed wrist and twisted. John knew little about Forerunner anatomy, but he assumed that even Forerunner hands had maximum rotational distances before they couldn't hold things. He was right. Catching the hilt as it fell, John twirled the blade around over his head and swept it in a wide arc. He watched with no small satisfaction as the now-shocked Didact stumbled back but could not avoid the touch of his own blade as it burnt through his neck. The

body collapsed almost immediately, but the head went sailing a little further back before burying itself in the dirt. Breathing heavily, John got down on one knee and forced Forthencho from the forefront of his mind. John would worry later. It would not do to have the Lord of Admirals's almost uncontrollable rage pulsing through John's head at the moment.

After a long moment, the entity retreated to that place it resided, that place that offered up observations and intuitions John had often called luck. Standing up, John released his grip on the tendril of hard light that had so easily burnt through flesh and blood and muscle and tendon and bone. He crossed over and picked up his Magnum, sliding a new mag into the gun. It wasn't his favourite assault rifle, but it would do. Looking up and around for an exit, John noticed that the world had started to evaporate, almost resembling depixelation. It was a silent process, likely fostered by the death of this virtual Didact, at least. John had no clue where to head until he heard her voice.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Awakening<p>

"Go now, child. Your SPARTAN needs your guidance." The Librarian's voice faded, its sea-foam green strains of music fading from Cortana's senses. She turned to watch as John loaded a clip into a pistol.

To almost any other watcher, he would have looked stoic, ready to face whatever other challenge presented itself in that decrepit arena. But Cortana knew better. He wasn't afraid, or angry, but he wasn't entirely stoic behind his golden visor. He looked lost, and maybe just a little sad. Well, sadder than usual. He didn't normally brood, but he was a soldier. John had seen death, and doled out well more than his fare share of it. Sadness was no stranger to John, as Cortana knew full well from time spent with their minds wrapped around each other; time when souls were mixed on a level far more personal and intimate than the mixing of lovers' souls.

That was, if A.I. could have souls. What made one human? Flesh? Emotion? A soul? Cortana didn't know, and, she suspected, neither did anyone. Were A.I. born with souls? Were humans? Could souls be earned? And for that matter, why was a soul important on the quest to humanity? Could Cortana become human simply by identifying as one? Or was she forever to be defined as naught but clever code? She'd been based off of a human, so was she human?

A thought. Were Prometheans? Could Prometheans feel? Not with sensors, but feel emotion? Could she? Or was it just a simulation by subroutines? But did it matter? Back to the beginning. How could one define emotion? Cortana thought what she felt was emotion, so was it? Could she be human simply by deciding to be one?

But those were questions for poets and philosophers. John looked sadder than before. Maybe he was missing her. Cortana hoped that was it, because that was something she could fix. She certainly didn't feel like she could fix anything else. Rampancy had taken its toll, and the Gravemind . . . Even years after it had died, it still found ways to get revenge. Trying to escape such self-deprecating thoughts, Cortana focused on the Librarian's words. "You must guide him out,

for he is trapped in memory not his own. Speak to him, show him the way out through the twists and turns of an ancient road that cannot be found without help. Lead him out. Lead him to you."

Cortana tried her voice out for the first time. She knew subroutines were activating speakers, but how different was it from a brain stimulating the larynx and lungs? These were her words, even if they didn't register straight through her, and required proxy. After all, so did humans. These were truly Cortana's first words, for never before had she looked at it like that. "Hello, John. Did you miss me?"

John spun around faster than Cortana would have thought possible. "Cortana? Where are you? Are you real?"

Cortana smiled sadly. It felt good to have John's confirmation that her name was indeed Cortana, but his voice was heavy with loss and mistrust. "I'm the real deal. Now, let's get this show on the road."

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Exploration<p>

John had almost jumped in surprise when the voice rumbled through the mental plane. He'd been expecting the Didact's bass, not the soft tones of a friend he knew. But she was speaking again.

"Well, you do know how to keep an impossible promise."

"I keep all my promises. You should know this."

"I should. I do. I guess I picked the right man."

"Lucky me."

He could feel her smile, even if, as an A.I., she wasn't supposed to have a mouth, because the hologram was for interaction with humans. But Cortana, Cortana thought herself human, smiling and gesticulating without consciously making her avatar do it. So she smiled. Cortana corrected John gently. "No. Lucky us. We're a team. I'm just glad you don't seem to have replaced me."

"There's never been any A.I. but you."

"So that's why you visited High Charity."

"And embarked on this journey. My soul was blackened with the ash of war, and this is how I chose to purify it. I am purifying with you."

Cortana would have her hands on her hips. "When did you become a poet?"

"I don't know. Why are we still talking? Knowing me, enemies will show up in just a moment and we'll both need to shut up so that I can concentrate."

"The Librarian explained some things to me. Because of who I am, what I am, I can get you out."

"You were trapped in memories when you punched the Didact during a mental link. You can't get out, not on your own. But I exist in the halfway place between asleep and awake, flesh and mind, machine and body. So I can communicate with you, tell you the way out, even if I can't go in there and get you. Just follow my voice.

"Oh, and the Librarian said that killing the projector of the dreamland would mess with the wetware. Expect glitches and errors, and be careful; the bugs in the system can still kill you."

"Fair enough. I suppose we'll just need to keep talking so that I can hear my way out." John started walking toward the voice, passing through solid arena wall as though it were smoke. A new scene superimposed itself over the land. A meadow. On fire.

The fire burnt with Cortana's voice, so John headed over to that patch, warily looking for glitches. "Alright. Catch me up. How did you get here?"

"I was forced into retirement, but I couldn't answer your question."

"My question? Oh . . . Which of us was man, and which was machine.

"You already answered that question. A machine wouldn't go out of his way to save a malfunctioning A.I. that, in all likelihood, had been completely destroyed."

"But if I'm man, then you must be the machine. And you're no machine. You're a person, and it is my duty to save everyone I can."

Cortana's voice snorted. "Duty? You said you'd been forced to resign. You didn't do this for duty. Don't bother lying, because if you're right and neither of us is machine . . . Well . . ." Cortana drew a long, shaky breath.

John remembered Blue Team and Parisa, Doctor Halsey and Captain Lasky. "We were both human once. We were taken, mechanised, that we could be moulded into the heroes that humanity needed us to be. And now we are fighting to reattain the humanity that was stripped from us."

Cortana's voice adopted a sarcastic tone. "Deep." It then faded to a gentle, comforting pitch. "But you're probably right.

"Follow my voice. We need to get you out. Tell me about your journey, give me something to think about."

"Well, I'm not much of an orator," A snort from Cortana. "but the story starts three days after the New Phoenix incident."

"Is that what they're calling it?"

"Yes, but that's not the point." The fire seemed a long ways off, as though new distance was being added as John walked. Then his danger sense tingled, and he reacted, rolling to dodge a spray of black liquid. John turned to see a shadowy wraith, thin and tall. He aimed

his pistol and fired three consecutive rounds that passed through the body like neutrinos.

"You need to use their weapons," Cortana informed him. "They're system errors, firing what amounts to bits of mangled data at you. Splice some of that into the bad code and it should be so messed up that it can't compile." John complied, leaping at the wraith. It raised a bulbous black, almost organic gun and a stream of black liquid ejected itself. John dodged most of it, but some still splattered as the wraith adjusted its shot. John's shields were reduced to almost nil by such a quick spray, so he quickly closed the distance, eager to be rid of an enemy with such a startlingly powerful weapon.

Luckily for John, the wraith didn't seem to be the best shot, and it certainly wasn't versed in hand-to-hand combat. John just rushed it, knocking the wraith to the ground before grabbing its arm and firing a stream of the foul smelling tar into the glitch's face by way of its own gun. Rather than bleed out, it just derezzed into a black puddle as erroneous code flooded its system. In a minute, the only thing that remained was the gun, which jacked itself into John's MJOLNIR armour as a "code sprayer."

Apparently, it had a maximum ammunition of 2147483647 bits. John almost groaned. "Don't tell me that the grenades will be called logic bombs." A low snort from Cortana, which John set to chasing.

The other end of the meadow finally began to grow closer as Cortana asked, "So, what happened after the New Phoenix Incident?"

"Well, I was put in a little house to try to get me out of the way," was all John managed to say before the scene changed again. A deep, rainy forest that completely disoriented him.

Cortana must have noticed, because she interrupted with a, "Knock knock."

John headed toward the rustling of leaves that whispered in Cortana's voice, giving the proper reply. "Who's there?"

"The Gestapo."

"The Gestapo who?" A wraith leapt from the trees and John opened up, black tar boiling away the creature before it could do anything.

"We'll be the ones telling the questions around here!" The effect was almost lost because of Cortana's purposely terrible German accent, but the joke got the job done. John honed in on her voice and ran, converting bugs and glitches in the system into no more than useless bits of looping code.

The pattern repeated over and over. John would share a little bit with Cortana, she would talk to him, get him oriented, and then he'd shoot the ghosts in the machine.

John had just finished explaining about the events of Gamma Halo when he noticed that the wraiths were significantly slower, but attacking in more numerous hordes. And they weren't the only slower things. The waves off the side of the twenty-third century cargo tanker John was

on had been beating much faster before he'd massacred a small army of thin, wispy wraiths by detonating a well-placed Boolean grenade in their midst. John was no computer expert, but he supposed that as he created more and more feedback errors, whatever technology created this place would suffer a massive runtime error.

John had absolutely no desire to be trapped when whatever controlled the dreamland hit the fan, so he just kept running, only pegging the stick-like glitch routines when he had to. Scenes shifted quickly. A high-rise. Sewers. Amber waves of grain. Tundra. An orbital research station. An extensive cave system. A small asteroid with one gee of gravity. Somehow.

The curvature of the asteroid was enough that John couldn't aim properly, and the now lumbering piles of redundant code advanced on all sides, issuing streams of deadly black liquid at the bubble shield John had hastily erected. He didn't get it. Cortana's voice was coming from right under his feet, and it was so loud that John could believe that her hologram was right next to him. Unsure of what to do John just kept shooting, staying alive as around him, the universe ground to a halt. The stray computer code trying to kill him kept getting slower and blurrier. Asteroids in the field above him tumbled through space at the speed of molasses. At one point, two on a collision course just phased right through each other. "Shoddy coding," had been Cortana's proclamation, but John figured that the system was just so full that it couldn't keep track of all the interactions between avatars.

And then John fell through the surface of reality and kept falling well past where the asteroid's brown surface disappeared and John was just falling through light blue that got steadily darker, like the gathering of clouds before the rain.

With a sudden thud, John came to a halt. He was back in his own battered armour, with a crack along the right side of his golden visor. The Didact's body lay on the walkway next to his, but John couldn't keep his eyes open long enough to see what happened. He was drained, and there was a pleasant cool iced-mercury feeling at the back of his skull that promised happiness.

As John's eyes closed, he could have sworn that he felt a hand caress his cheek through his armour and heard the Librarian's voice whisper, "Your mind is at its limit. Rest. Friends are on the way." John drifted off to sleep, a malady from which even SPARTANs suffered.

And all was become darkness, save the inexorable press of time ever on. John was drifting through nothing, listening intently for something, but there was nothing.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Please, tell me your thoughts. I tried to make it sound plausible, but I'm not sure how well I did. Also, how well did I do capturing the John/Cortana dynamic and Cortana's question as to who is man and who is machine? Investigating their relationship was the point of this fic, so stay tuned for my epilogue Lady Night.\*\*

\*\*And yeah, I dropped a pair of F-bombs, but I think they were

precision F-strikes. I welcome any corrections of this notion, if you disagree with my assertion.\*\*

## 11. Lady Night

\*\*A/N: Finally got around to rewriting this. Destiny is a massive time suck. If you want to see a Destiny fic (or a crossover), just let me know.\*\*

\*\*Disclaimer: I am in no way affiliated with Microsoft, Bungie, or 343 Industries. This is for my enjoyment and, hopefully, the enjoyment of others. I do not receive a profit.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Lady Night<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Day Two of Exploration<p>

John was floating. He supposed that he'd always be floating, now. There was a darkness pressing in every which way, as though he was drifting in space. There weren't any noises, nor the feel of anything. \_This is what dying feels like.\_ John wouldn't know. He was a SPARTAN. SPARTANs never die.

John wasn't needed anymore, though. It was time to go Missing In Action. In the back of his mind, John knew he was dying alone on a Forerunner space station. He hoped they'd never find his body. Then he could remain a legend, an inspiration for all of humanity.

At least Cortana had had her rebirth. John paused. There was something wrong with that thought. But what? His mind was heavy, and he wanted to sleep; to dream; to die. John struggled for seven long moments before it came to him.

Cortana! If he died, she would too. John was a soldier for humanity. He'd done his fighting. Humanity was saved from the Covenant. Now it was time for peace. Peace and rest. But if he stopped now, Cortana would suffer. She mayn't have been human, but in the end, who was man, and who machine?

His voice was hollow. "Cortana!" he said. "Cortana!" There was no answer. He supposed that there never would be. He'd never hear her tease him. He'd never hear her wax eloquent about some aspect of the nature of the universe. He'd just float in this grey mess forever.

Grey? Hadn't it been black before? John fought, shaking his limbs and trying to break free. After a minute of motion, John heard a voice, far off and up high. It was low and gravelly as it said, "The Demon stirs. Alert the Arbiter." John pushed harder, forcing his way out of the murk. Colour began to resolve around him, revealing a long grey face with four jaws peering down onto him. John reacted purely on instinct, coiling his muscles and attempting to push off of the floor. There was one problem. There was no floor. The Sangheili saw the movement and spoke in guttural English. "You are on a gravity sled, Demon. The Arbiter saw fit to bring you aboard the \_Hierarch's



Redemption\_."

Then a far more pleasant voice rang in John's ear. "You know, if you want to walk, I can turn off the sled." John smiled. It was good to hear that voice again.

"Yes, please." With a low whir, the sled shut down, and John felt his weight return. If anyone else had been lying back like that, the results would have been a lot less pretty. As it was, John's attempt to shift the full weight of his MJOLNIR and cybernetic-enhanced body wasn't pretty anyway. He just barely managed to land in a squat before rising up almost as tall as the six Sangheili around him.

Not once breaking stride, the Sangheili gathered up around him in a looser formation than before, and led him unerringly through the maze on the inside of Paradigm. After some time, the group came to a massive metal wall. The Sangheili from before spoke once again. "Your hand is needed, Demon. Place it upon the portal." Nodding to himself, John rested one gloved hand on the wall. As he pulled it away, the wall started to glow where his hand had been. The red handprint lasted a moment on the wall before fading away. The "wall" dissolved a moment later, and John stepped out of the building and onto the sands of Paradigm.

"Fascinating," was all Cortana would say as John followed his entourage to a Phantom drop ship hovering several metres above the desert. As one, the group walked into the Phantom's gravlift. The ride to the \_Hierarch's Redemption\_ was silent.

\* \* \*

><p>Day One of Rescue<p>

As John floated down off of the Phantom, he took note of the massive hangar bay. There were few ships for such a large space, and even fewer troops. A pair of Unggoy pushed a crate while nearby, two Sangheili loitered. A few Kig-Yar were inspecting consoles, as were several other Sangheili. A lone Huragok drifted aimlessly. By and large, the place was empty. So naturally, the only way out of the hangar involved walking past every alien in the room.

The two Unggoy stopped what they were doing to watch the passage of a Demon in olive green armour. The Kig-Yar screeched and shifted back and forth. The Sangheili, however, looked on with indecision. To John, it looked as though they were debating between shaking his hand and running him through with an energy stave. Apparently, Cortana saw much the same, and muttered something about, "shake and shank."

When the purple metal doors slid open to admit John, he saw a familiar set of armour. Archaic, the silver armour represented Thel' Vadam's fall and subsequent rise as Arbiter for his people. In baritone, he said, "SPARTAN, we did not know it was you we would find. The message merely gave us coordinates. I am sorry, but we do not have sleeping quarters designed to withstand your weight. Would the Rear Observation Module be acceptable?"

"Thanks for the rescue. Anywhere is fine."

With a respectful nod, the Arbiter turned. Raising a hand, he dismissed the rest of the crew, leaving just the Arbiter and the

Master Chief alone in an empty hall. The Arbiter took a step forward, and John followed. The two weaved their way through the empty ship. Comparing the silence to previous times aboard Covenant spaceships, Cortana spoke up through the Master Chief's armour mic. "Why are you so far out here? And where is everyone? Normally, they try to greet us by attacking en masse."

Everything was silent except the gentle thrum of the ship's engine while the Arbiter weighed his responses. After rounding yet another corner, he said, "It is good to hear from you, Construct. I was afraid our expedition to High Charity might have been for naught." The Arbiter took a deep breath, as though preparing to reveal classified information. "This is a skeleton crew. We received an SOS message from Long Night of Solace some time ago. After gathering the absolute minimum amount needed for an expedition to deep space, we left to find the ship. Records say it disappeared over your planet Reach. After the war, the records might be wrong, but we are in sore need of supplies, both military and civilian. A super carrier could remove some of that burden."

Putting the pieces together quickly, Cortana replied, "I assume that ONI doesn't know."

"If they did, we wouldn't have made it this far."

Cortana didn't respond. John knew it was his duty to tell the UNSC. It was also Cortana's duty. But he had been stripped of rank, and she was listed as "terminated." He'd checked. They still had a duty to humanity. But not a duty to the UNSC. This was John's secret to keep. He'd talk to Cortana about it later.

At long last, a whirring of metal pulled the purple door open to reveal a transparent bubble populated with stars. John stepped inside, his boots clanging against the clear floor. The Arbiter stayed outside the pod, eyes intently focused upon John. Turning, John said, "Thank you."

The Arbiter gave no acknowledgement of the thanks other than the slightest of movements with his jaws. After a moment staring at the stars in the background, he said, "I'll alert Lord Hood to your presence aboard the ship." He stepped away from the door and hit a console, making the door slide shut.

Just before the door finished closing, John said, "No. Don't." There was no indication that the Arbiter had heard, but John knew he had. Instead of worrying, he turned and looked out at the stars in the distance. He didn't say anything to Cortana, and she didn't say anything to him. Words couldn't have described the emotions either one experienced, even though neither was supposed to have emotion.

Instead, the pair sat in quiet companionship as the helm created a whirling purple storm and piloted the vessel through. Slipstream space closed over the pair, leaving the solar system alone and quiet as planets drifted slowly through nothing, awash in starlight.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Finally. Once again, sorry. Also, I am thinking about writing Halo:6. Drop a review if you want me to write 6 or anything

in particular.\*\*

## 12. Rebirth

\*\*A/N: Well, it looks like my guess for Halo: 5 was wrong (although I hear that the Arbiter's coming back, so I don't care). Admittedly, I could make a case for Parisa Lavine being Locke. I got the armour colours right, she was at least a semi-important character, and Locke is an obvious code name for a SPARTAN whose last name starts with L. Locke being a "him" is just a SamusIsAGirl reveal. (Obligatory TVTropes Link: [tvtropes. /Main/SamusIsAGirl](http://tvtropes.com/Main/SamusIsAGirl)) [Warning: TVTropesWillRuinYourLife: [tvtropes . /Main/TVTropesWillRuinYourLife](http://tvtropes.com/Main/TVTropesWillRuinYourLife)].\*\*

\*\*If the Arbiter is a playable character, then I suppose that I'll need to start this up again with a few Arbiter levels. If you wish that, let me know.\*\*

\*\*First though, a short teaser from Jorge.\*\*

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\* \* \*

><p>Rebirth<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Unknown Time Since Detonation<p>

A pair of cat's eyes opened as a hiss heralded the time syncing of the Covenant stasis pod. Technically, the eyes weren't a cat's. Technically, the stasis pod wasn't the Covenant's. Both belonged to Jorge.

And no one was going to challenge Jorge. Not tonight. For starters, only a portion of the ship had come through. Furthermore, Noble Six had killed most of the aliens in the portion that had arrived. Also, the third thing Jorge owned was a heavy machine gun. Like everything else that Jorge owned, it didn't have a name. The two Unggoy still alive called it Deathspitter the Eternal anyway.

At the moment the stasis pod was rejoining the local flow of time however, Kipyip and Wikwok were nowhere to be seen. They, like most of their brethren, weren't stupid. They'd just been a bit luckier, surviving the first attack by virtue of being at the food nipple. From there, they'd timed the Demon and figured out when it would wake up and which routes it took to get to the radio room, and how long it tried contacting the BattleNet. Kipyip thought that the BattleNet was down because the slipspace bomb had dropped them out of the Universe or something similarly eldritch. (He'd said spooky, but he meant eldritch.) Wikwok thought the BattleNet was down because the war was over. (He meant in the sense that the almighty Covenant had been defeated, but that would mean that there would never be rescue, and he didn't want to say that.) Neither knew what the Demon thought, and neither wanted to ask. But they had fun guessing. Besides, there was nothing else to do; recreation and crew quarters had been in a

different part of the ship.

Jorge didn't know that either of them existed, but, while checking the radio room, Jorge did learn that he wasn't alone. A singular dot on lidar sat coolly, approaching at a relatively low speed. Not even Jorge's augmented eyes could make out the object from the ship's windows, but the unknown's Friend or Foe tag identified it as a friend, which meant it was Jorge's foe.

Oh well. It probably had a slipspace drive. Jorge could steal it, and he'd only have a couple hundred evil aliens to kill. The BattleNet (when it had been active) had informed him that the Covenant had glassed Reach, and part of Africa. He didn't quite understand some of it. Floods and Noah's Ark and angel hats and betrayal, but he understood the bit about glassing his home. Jorge was angry, and here was a delivery of evil aliens to brutally mutilate and maybe even kill for revenge. Jorge grinned and headed back to his stasis pod to grab his heavy machine gun, his eyes guiding him around the dark and decrepit ship.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Yes, it's short. Also, I was checking my chapters for the first time in a long time and I realised that FF ate chapter eleven. If anyone has it saved somewhere, or knows how to get it back, please please please talk to me.\*\*

\*\*To those of you totally confused, chapter eleven was when the Arbiter found MC and rescued him, since they were looking for Long Night of Solace, since they received a distress call from the ship and it was a super carrier and the Sangheili are short on ships and they have no clue where it disappeared to over Reach.\*\*

\*\*I could write a reasonable facsimile of the chapter, but if someone has a better way to recover it, please do let me know.  
Thanks.\*\*

\*\*EDIT: Chapter rewritten.\*\*

End  
file.